

# Children's developing concept of truth and lies and the implications for child witness testimony

November 20 2015

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Recently, Dr. Victoria Talwar's 4-year-old was caught standing in suspicious circumstances. He was hiding behind the pantry door, but when questioned about what he was doing, he took on an air of complete innocence. "Were you eating one of the cookies?" –one of the forbidden cookies that he had been told he could not have. The 4-year-old shook his head "No!" but there was a chocolate smear around his lips. When questioned about these marks on his face, the 4-year-old paused and his

mind feverishly searched for a reply. Finally, the answer came in a sigh "Dirt! I'm just dirty mummy!" Although Dr. Talwar did not smile then, she had to chuckle later. Playing out in her kitchen was a scene she has seen a thousand times before in her research lab at McGill.

Dr. Victoria Talwar is a Canada Research Chair (II) and an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University. She has been working in the area of developmental psychology for over fifteen years with an emphasis on [children](#)'s social-cognitive and moral development. Her research on the development of children's lie-telling behavior and related child witness issues has had a significant impact across both scientific and public domains (e.g., legal reform). Her interdisciplinary research is informed by the disciplines of psychology, education, and law to examine behaviours that are pertinent to children's adaptive development, child witness testimony, and professionals who work with children.

The first main focus of Dr. Talwar's research is on the development of children's understanding of the concepts of truth and lies and their actual truth-telling and lie-telling behaviour. Like the example with her 4-year-old, Dr. Talwar and her graduate students examine situations where children tell lies both in the lab and in natural settings like home or school. In some of her lab studies, children play games and complete tasks in which they can commit a transgression like sneaking a peek at a forbidden toy, or they help another person out by letting the other person "win" a game, or they can be politely positive when given a disappointing gift like a bar of soap (instead of an attractive toy). In such situations, Dr. Talwar and her team are examining how children come to grips with the moral implications of lying, whether children are gullible or able to detect others' lies, and whether children's truth and lie-telling behaviour changes across social situations.

Prior to her research, only a couple of studies had examined children's

lie-telling behaviour and her research was the first to examine the developmental trajectories of lying in children beyond preschool age. She has conducted this research here in Canada, US, West Africa and China. She has found that lying follows a universal pattern emerging in the preschool years and is related to children's emerging cognitive abilities (e.g., theory-of-mind and executive function) irrespective of cultural norms and expectations. This suggests that the early development of children's lie-telling abilities may be a reflection of children's adaptive normative development. Like her 4-year-old, children around the world start to tell lies as they learn to strategically use their knowledge about the world and other people's minds to their advantage. Lying in a four-year-old is just another sign of their development!

Of course, lying is not a behavior we wish to encourage and we socialize children about the importance of honesty. Dr. Talwar's recent research examines how this process of socialization occurs and how it interacts with children's developing cognitive and social skills. Her recent research with children who have externalizing problems, children with fetal alcohol syndrome (FASD), and children with autism has examined different cognitive and social influences (e.g., social competence, expressive display use, parenting practices) on the developmental trajectories of lie-telling behaviour as well as different factors that are associated with some children's maladaptive lie-telling later in childhood and adolescence.

The development of lie-telling and the methods of promoting truth-telling in children is both theoretically valuable because it answers questions about children's social-cognitive development as well as practically valuable because it helps to assess, encourage, and educate truthfulness in children. These findings have been disseminated to the wider community through various media outlets, including the ABC Nightline, CBC The Current, CBC As it Happens, Wall Street Journal, New York Times, The Guardian, Rachel Ray Show, Newsweek, Time,

and Parenting magazines, among others in North America and internationally (e.g., in Finland, Norway, UK, Israel, India, Australia, Brazil, Columbia).

Dr. Talwar's research has important legal implications regarding children's competency to testify and has resulted in legal reform (e.g., Bala, Lee, Lindsay, & Talwar, 2001; 2009; 2010; Bala, Talwar & Harris, 2006; Talwar, Lee & Lindsay, 2010). For instance, in the USA and Canada, courts have often required children to answer questions during the competency inquiry about their understanding of truth and lie-telling before being permitted to testify. In some cases, children have not been permitted to testify based on their inability to satisfactorily answer such questions. However, her research demonstrated that children's abilities to answer such questions were not predictive of children's abilities to give truthful testimony. Her research also indicated that having children promise to tell the truth before testifying highlights the importance of telling the truth to children and increases the likelihood that they will be truthful in their subsequent statements. Due to her findings, Dr. Talwar worked with others to co-author briefs to the Canadian parliament advocating changes in the law to eliminate components of the competence examination used to qualify child witnesses (Brief on Bill C-20, October 2003; Brief on Bill C-2, March 2005), which contributed to a new law Canada Evidence Act. s.16 .1 regarding the process of qualifying children under age 14 and securing their commitment to tell the truth (January, 2006). She has also presented continuing education workshops and presentations on child witness competency and credibility to lawyers and judges in Quebec and Ontario.

In her Canada Foundation for Innovation funded research lab at McGill, Dr. Talwar and her graduate students in the School Psychology and Human Development programs in the Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology are currently working on projects examining factors that can increase the veracity and accuracy of child witness

reports. For example, her recent studies have looked at children's reports about their own behaviour and their interactions with an adult who asks them to "keep a secret." One of these studies focused on children's decisions to either falsely deny (i.e., lie to cover up for an adult's crime) or falsely accuse (i.e., lie to say an adult committed a crime they didn't commit) an experimenter of stealing money from a wallet. Dr. Talwar has used these and other types of scenarios to explore the types of factors that influence children's lie-telling and truth-telling behaviour when confronted with these decisions and factors that increase their truthful disclosures.

These studies highlight another goal of Dr. Talwar's research, which is to test the best strategies for interviewing children to increase the truthfulness and accuracy of their reports. Currently, during cross-examination, lawyers are able to ask multiple-clause statements, double negative questions, and use suggestive questioning strategies. These types of questions can be difficult to answer, even for adults, but especially for children who are still developing their cognitive abilities. Dr. Talwar's research has explored different types of interviewing strategies to see how interviewing methods affect children's reports. One of these studies looked at children's responses after open-ended questioning (i.e., what happened?) compared to close-ended questioning (i.e., did this happen, yes or no responses). The results of these studies are being used to establish better, more supportive ways of interviewing children about their experiences. Also as part of this research, Dr. Talwar has studied adult's perceptions and beliefs of child witness credibility as well as their ability to detect true and false reports. This research is relevant for jury decision making and for front line workers (e.g., police, social workers, psychologists) who must assess the veracity and credibility of children's reports.

**More information:** Victoria Talwar et al. The effects of punishment and appeals for honesty on children's truth-telling behavior, *Journal of*

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Provided by McGill University

Citation: Children's developing concept of truth and lies and the implications for child witness testimony (2015, November 20) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-11-children-concept-truth-lies-implications.html>

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