

When do teens lie to their parents (and when do they tell the truth)?

December 14 2023, by Sandra Knispel



The secret life of the american teenager: As most parents know—and as prior research shows—when children become teenagers, their willingness to share information and keep parents in the loop often declines, while secrecy increases. A new Rochester study explores the narratives behind the choices teens make to tell the whole truth or keep a secret. Credit: University of Rochester / Julia Joshpe

It's a truth universally acknowledged that most teenagers, at one time or another, will hide information from their parents. Some will lie outright.

Yet, when they do lie—do they plan to fib ahead of time? What about when they share [information](#)—do they do so voluntarily? And do they employ the same (mis)information strategies every time when they do something, or plan on doing something that they know their parents won't be happy about?

Of course, lying is not exclusive to adolescents. "Most people lie. Often more than once a day," clarifies Judith Smetana, a professor of psychology at the University of Rochester.

But while we all regularly engage in social lies—"cute dress"; "I like the new haircut"; "sorry, we have a prior engagement"—[teens](#) also often lie about their routine activities, such as where they were, with whom, and what they were doing.

Timing is (nearly) everything

In a [study](#), published in the *Journal of Adolescence*, Smetana and two University of Rochester psychology graduate students, Sduduzo Mncwabe and Yuejiao Li, explored the narratives of 131 [teenagers](#) and [college students](#) who had been interviewed about a time when they did something that their parents disagreed with or had expressly forbidden.

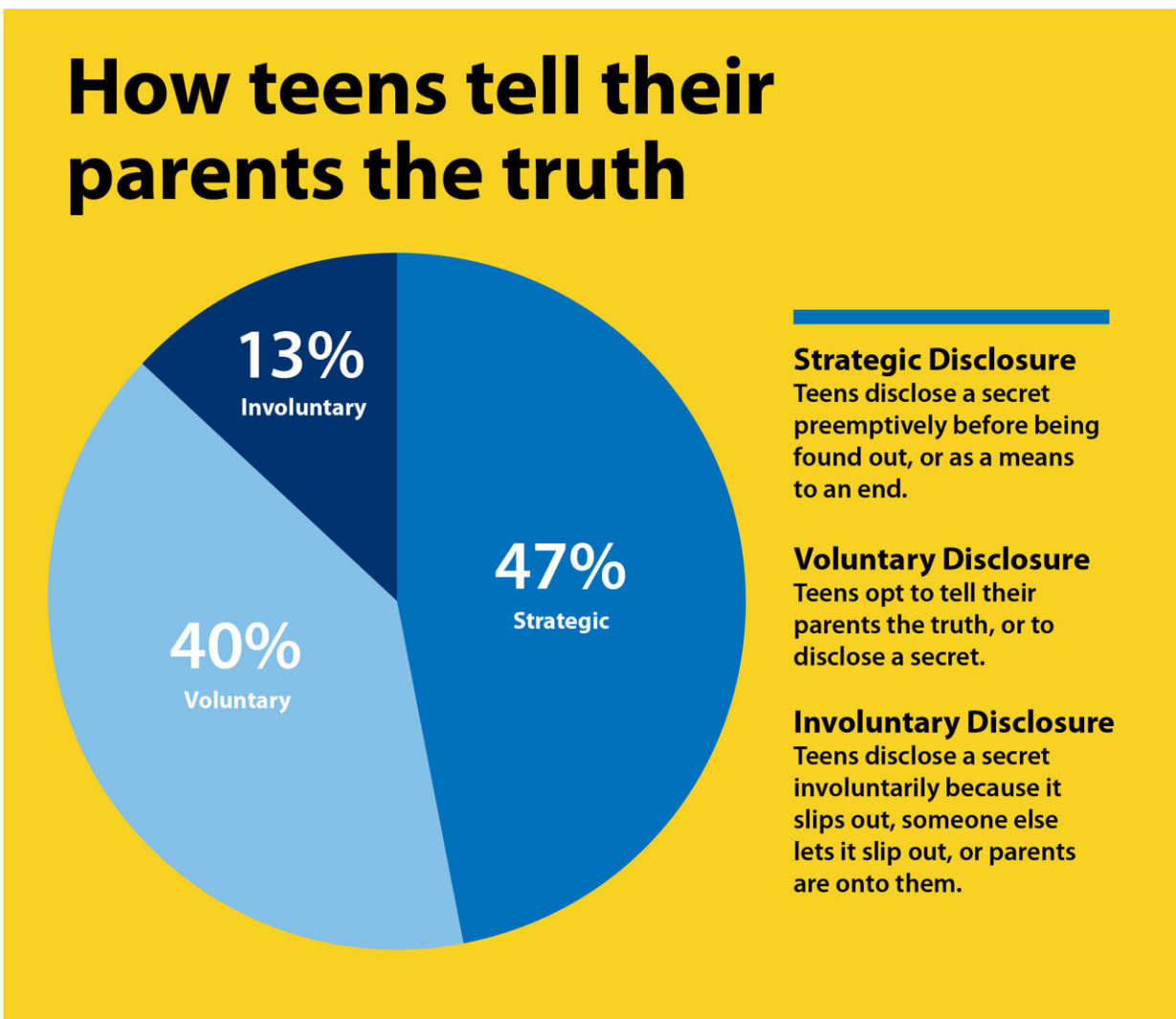
Study participants were asked about each of these three scenarios: a time when they subsequently disclosed (part or all of it), concealed, or lied about an activity that their parents disapproved of.

The team coded the narrated interviews for voluntariness, timing, consistency, and lessons learned. Part of the research addressed the frequent assumption that disclosure is voluntary, i.e. that teens who tell

part or the whole [truth](#) do so on their own volition. "But that's not always the case, which is what we suspected and, indeed, found," says Smetana.

As most parents know—and which has been shown in prior research—as children become teenagers, their willingness to share information and keep parents in the loop declines, while secrecy increases.

"Partly, that's about autonomy development, and teens doing what they want to do, even if it involves risky behavior," says Smetana.



"It's significant," that only 40% of study participants disclosed the salient information of their own volition—"far less" than what had been commonly assumed, says Smetana. Credit: University of Rochester illustration / Julia Joshpe

Key findings

Teenagers disclose information to their parents primarily voluntarily (40%), or strategically (47%)—either as a means to an end, such as telling the truth about a party to which they may need a ride, or preemptively because they suspect their parents will find out anyway.

"It's significant," that only 40% of study participants disclosed the salient information of their own volition—"far less" than what had been [commonly assumed](#), says Smetana.

Involuntary truth telling or involuntary disclosing, the team found, is much less frequent (13%), and could involve a friend's spilling the beans accidentally, a teen's getting a tattoo that is eventually seen by parents, or by getting pressured by parents to tell.

Timing plays a crucial role: adolescents were more likely to lie (53%) before the event or action that their parents would not condone. However, telling the truth or disclosing the information occurred more often after they had already engaged in the parentally disapproved activity (35% disclosed the dodgy activity shortly afterwards, 8% lied for an extended time before coming clean, and 23% told the truth at some unspecified time).

Unsurprisingly (to any parent of teenagers), the teens in the study proved nimble in their approaches: they typically reported additional strategies besides the ones the researchers were specifically asking about, using

multiple strategies around the same event.

"Disclosure may not be the first thing they do. Maybe they tried to get away with it without telling their parents. Or maybe they concealed first, and then they disclosed. It's really shades of gray—usually not black and white," says Smetana.

Telling the truth voluntarily is linked to personal growth

Study participants were asked what, if anything, they had learned from their recounted experiences of disclosure and lying. Not all proved good ones, says Smetana. "The lesson learned about lying could be, 'I'm a good liar!' And we did get some of that."

Overall, the researchers found that, regardless of age, telling the truth (or part of it) voluntarily was associated with teens' reporting positive change, such as greater psychological growth in understanding themselves, their purpose, self-efficacy, or connections to others and parents. When it came to experiences of truth telling, the team noticed that the disclosure narratives contained more motives, intentions, and desires—compared to the teens' narratives about concealment or lying.

"They had a better psychological understanding of themselves and made more psychological meaning out of disclosure, than out of concealment or lying," says Smetana.

Conversely, teenagers drew more negative conclusions when retelling experiences of lying, such as more [negative views](#) and less clarity about themselves, more negative emotions, or poorer self-image. Additionally, disclosing after—rather than before—the narrated event was associated with greater likelihood of lessons learned about the self.

Advice for parents

According to Smetana, researchers used to think that parents who monitor their children—who have firm rules and ask their kids what they are up to—would be able to keep their offspring out of trouble. More recent research, however, indicates that parental monitoring doesn't improve parents' knowledge of their children's lives. Instead, it all comes down to the teens' willingness to share information.

"Do whatever you can to be responsive and keep the lines of communication open so that your kids will tell you voluntarily, not under pressure," says Smetana.

The key to sharing pertinent information are warm, trusting [parent-child relationships](#) that develop prior to adolescence and continue throughout life. There are some things teens choose not to disclose because they see the issues as personal and private—not the parent's business, notes Smetana.

To some extent that's ok, she says, because it helps foster teen autonomy. But parents and teenagers often differ on what is private and should be up to the teen to decide—versus what parents need to know to keep their teens safe. Adolescents may not tell parents about risky behavior, for example, because they are afraid they'll get in trouble, or that their parents will think less of them.

"This is where trust and good communication are especially important, because it might mitigate [parents'](#) negative responses," says Smetana. "Having a good relationship with your teen fosters disclosure. It's not a quick fix."

More information: Judith G. Smetana et al, Voluntariness, timing, and consistency in adolescent routine disclosure and lying to parents, *Journal*

of Adolescence (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/jad.12265](https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12265)

Provided by University of Rochester

Citation: When do teens lie to their parents (and when do they tell the truth)? (2023, December 14) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-teens-parents-truth.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.