Research provides tips to reduce children's lying

May 8 2024

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Getting children to speak the truth can be a struggle at times. While a lie, when discovered, is often followed by a punishment, there's a more effective way to prevent future fibbing, says new Brock-led research.

"Previous studies have found punishing lie-telling actually increases this behavior because children are afraid of getting in trouble," says Brock Professor of Psychology Angela Evans, lead author of the article, "Encouraging Honesty: Developmental Differences in the Influence of Honesty Promotion Techniques" published in *Developmental Psychology*.

A combination of techniques that encourage and praise truth-telling has been shown to reduce whether children lie to conceal a wrongdoing, she adds.

Evans and McGill University Professor of Educational and Counseling Psychology Victoria Talwar conducted a two-part study, with each portion designed to test the effectiveness of a range of honesty promotion techniques in children aged 3 to 8, separated into two-year age groups.

One part saw the researchers test whether the combination of two techniques—modeling, where children are exposed to examples of other people being honest; and consequences, which shows children a positive outcome of truth-telling, approval from parents and others when the truth is spoken—would further boost truth-telling in children across age groups.

A total of 228 children participated in an exercise in which each child was left alone in a room with a toy on a table behind where the child was sitting. The experimenter instructed the child not to peek at the toy and then left the room, with a hidden camera recording what the child did when alone. Most of the children peeked at the toy.

After returning to the room, the experimenter read a story to the child. Some children heard a version about a character who modeled honesty by admitting they broke a window with their bouncy ball. Others heard a story without the character owning up to breaking the window but the

mother saying she would be pleased if her child told the truth, which simulated consequences.

Finally, a portion of the child participants heard the full story of the character saying they broke the window, the mother's encouragement to tell the truth and praise for the character for having done so: "I'm glad you did not lie. It makes me happy that you told the truth."

The child was then asked whether they had peeked at the toy.

The researchers found children across all age groups who heard the full version of the story were the most likely to confess peeking at the toy compared to those who heard the versions containing only modeling or consequences.

"Our findings suggest that modeling honesty or telling children about the positive outcomes of honesty are not enough and that children need to see both the modeling of honesty and what the consequences of doing so are together," says Evans.

She encourages parents to provide models of honesty for their children through parental behavior, reading stories such as "George Washington and the Cherry Tree" that encourage truth-telling, and rewarding honesty in day-to-day interactions.

"As parents, the gut reaction when a child has done something wrong is to respond to the negative behavior that's happened," says Evans. "This study is a reminder to praise the child for telling the truth about their wrongdoing, rather than focusing on the wrongdoing itself."

Evans recommends considering a lesser punishment for wrongdoing, such as one week without screen time instead of two, because they told the truth—and being explicit that the difference is due to their honesty.

In the other part of the study, researchers looked at two additional techniques—self-awareness and promising to be honest—to determine which ones encouraged truth-telling in the age groups.

To encourage self-awareness, the researchers had children look in the mirror and point to parts of their own face and state their name, grade or age.

Researchers found self-awareness was most effective in reducing lie-telling for 3- to 4-year-olds, while promising to tell the truth reduced lie-telling for the 7- to 8-year-olds.