

# Children and Lying

Study focuses on reasons why

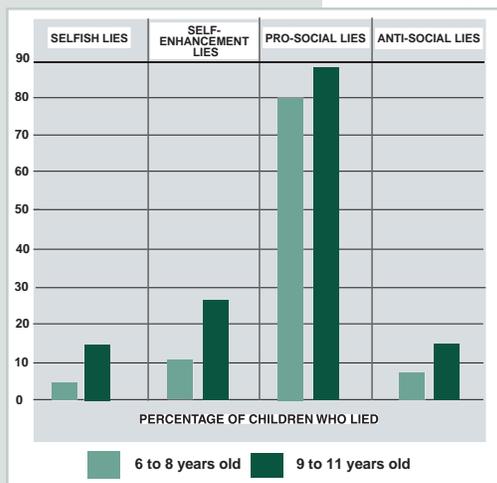
by Susan McGinley

To find out what kinds of lies children use, and when they start using them, researchers at the UA developed an interview format consisting of open-ended situations where children had to decide whether or not they would lie. The participants were also asked whether they felt lying was right or wrong in each situation, and they discussed their reasons for their judgments. The study looked at four types of lies:

- **Pro-social:** Lying to protect someone, to benefit or help others.
- **Self-enhancement:** Lying to save face, avoid embarrassment, disapproval or punishment. These lies are not intended to hurt anyone, rather they benefit the self.
- **Selfish:** Lying to protect the self at the expense of another, and/or to conceal a misdeed.
- **Anti-social:** Lying to hurt someone else intentionally.

An example vignette features a bully who is looking for the child's friend. Does the child tell the bully where the friend is, or lie? In this case, most of the participants said they'd lie to protect their friend. They believed for the most part that it was not wrong to lie in this way, because the motive was to benefit someone else.

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A recent University of Arizona study on lying in children reveals that lying increases as children age, and that the majority of these are pro-social, or “white lies,” intended to benefit or help others.

“The dog ate my homework.” “He started it.” “I’m sick today.” “She’s not here.” Children tell these lies frequently, often to avoid punishment, ward off embarrassment, or even protect someone. Even though children seemingly tell lies for the same reasons adults do, lying tends to be condemned more often in children as morally wrong, according to Wendy Gamble, a behavioral scientist in the University of Arizona School of Family and Consumer Sciences (SFCS).

“We have to get a handle on lying in social relationships early on in kids because it has implications for how they behave down the line,” she maintains. “A tendency to lie or deceive will affect the way children form and maintain relationships with others. Honesty is the basis of effective communication and healthy relationships. Rather than dismiss all lying as bad, however, we should tailor our socialization messages to reflect that deception is common and frequently socially acceptable.”

Gamble notes that parents and other professionals working with children may need to discuss this issue in terms of when and to whom it may be appropriate to lie, rather than saying lying is absolutely wrong at any time.

“Our data suggest that even children in first grade can understand the distinctions,” Gamble says. “Our

disciplinary strategies need to be in tune with their maturing of these behaviors.” Gamble believes that lies need to be examined without a moral bias to learn more about how children adjust socially.

To find out more about why children lie and how that fits into their social interactions Gamble conducted a study of both positive

and negative types of lies among 98 school children in Tucson last year. All of the students participated voluntarily, with their parents’ permission. SFCS graduate student Julie Chiao Pin Wang and two undergraduate students interviewed the children individually during after-school programs (see sidebar).

Preliminary results from the audio-taped, transcribed interviews show that truth-telling exceeded lying for all of the children, but lying increased with age, and the lies were mostly pro-social (designed to benefit someone.) Very few of the lies were anti-social (deliberately hurtful to others), and there were no gender differences in the numbers and types of lies told.

“White lies are almost universally accepted among adults, but lying is considered naughty in children, and a precursor to other behavioral problems,” Gamble says. “Although the sheer numbers and types of lies increased among the older children, the good news is that they were intended to benefit another person or protect someone’s feelings.”

Surprisingly—or maybe not—the results showed a tendency for children to tell more pro-social lies among their peers, and more selfish and self-enhancement lies to their mothers.

“Although age is important, the recipient of the lies makes a difference as well,” Gamble says. “College-age students in another study also told more lies to their mothers.”

She cautions that these results are preliminary and that more study is needed, particularly to clarify the parents’ roles in children’s lying and to determine cultural differences.

“We’d also like to study why some children continue to lie even when it doesn’t serve any apparent purpose,” Gamble says. “And because the children in the study were mostly from middle-class backgrounds, the next step would be to look at cultural and socioeconomic differences.” ❖