

Keeping kids in the dark

The plight of the Pinocchio parent

Kids, lying is wrong. But what happens when Mom and Dad regularly fib to their tots? A new study shows what many parents preach isn't always what they practise.



Researcher Kang Lee acknowledges he fibs to his own son: To stop Nathan from fidgeting, Mr. Lee tells him the hazard button is an 'eject' tool. Jennifer Roberts for The Globe and Mail

Sarah Boesveld

Sunday, Sep. 27, 2009 07:18PM EDT

Lying children will not be tolerated in Kelli Catana's house.

But each time her mother-in-law steps out for a cigarette, she hears the same inquisitive chorus from her four kids: "Where's Nanny going?"

She'll tell them Nanny went out to the car. Or that she had to go get something. An honest answer would involve a frank chat about the perils of smoking. Heavy stuff for children aged 7 to 2.

"If I tell them, then my mother-in-law's going to walk in and they're going to say, 'You're killing yourself and you're going to die,' " says the 37-year-old Ottawa mom. "There's a limit. I mean, do I tell serious lies to my children? It depends."

While most mothers and fathers try to walk their talk, many are Pinocchio parenting – teaching their kids that lying is bad while regularly feeding them fibs, a new study has found.

In a report published in the current issue of the *Journal of Moral Education*, researchers at the University of Toronto and the University of California found that parents who stress the importance of truth-telling to their little ones quite often tell lies to influence the children's behaviour or emotions, whether it's an idle threat to make them eat their peas or boost their confidence by praising their ear-splitting saxophone solo.

"Because it's easy, we just do it," says study co-author Kang Lee, director of the Institute of Child Studies at the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "Some parents may have been doing it for years and they really have no idea they are actually telling lies."

Prof. Lee and Gail Heyman, a psychology professor at the University of California San Diego, conducted two studies to find out whether parents lie to their kids to influence behaviour or emotions. The first asked 127 American undergraduate students to recall lies their parents told them. They were then read anecdotes involving a mother and a six-year-old daughter and judged the intent of the lie: Was it told to make the child behave or to make them feel better about themselves? Finally, the students were asked whether their parents emphasized the importance of honesty to them as kids. The second study quizzed 127 parents in a similar style on whether they lie to their kids and if they teach honesty in their homes.

Both studies found parents regularly lie to their kids while sending the overall message that lying is wrong.

The consequences of parenting-by-lying will be the basis of his next study, which Prof. Lee expects will reveal both positive and negative effects.

"If your child discovers that mom and dad has lied, they may realize not every single word we say is true and that would allow them to develop a healthy sense of skepticism," he says. "But on the other hand they might lose trust."

While Prof. Lee encourages parents to try more honest tactics instead of telling a lie, he's quick to own up to a little Pinocchio-parenting of his own.

To quell his son's habit of fidgeting in his car-seat, the savvy dad renamed the hazard button on his dashboard the "eject" button. If dad presses the button, six-year-old Nathan thinks he'll be catapulted from the vehicle.

"I just put my hand over it" and Nathan behaves, Dr. Lee says.

Parents tell good lies and bad lies, says Daniel Lagacé-Séguin, an associate professor of psychology at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax who researches parenting and social development.

"Often when parents lie, it's not the same type of lying they're trying to discourage their kids from doing," he says. But if the child catches mom and dad in a fib, parents should be ready with a solid justification, he says.

Most parents lie to shield their children from knowing too much too soon.

In early July, Scott Fortnum's kids discovered baby mice in the garage of their Innisfil, Ont., home. Fascinated by the tiny creatures, Marshall, 11, and Tessa, 8 committed themselves to the rodents' care, vowing to rise every two hours to feed them. When they weren't looking, the 44-year-old dad moved the rodents to the field behind their house where their chance of survival was slim. He told the kids he'd taken them to the Humane Society where professionals could care for them.

"It was a lie to save us huge amounts of time that we didn't have and to save them from being very upset," he says.

The "lies" he tells his kids are meant to protect them from damaging information or from hurt feelings. Others are clearly told in jest, such as the grandiose claim that he went to high school with the tooth fairy.

Parents shouldn't feel badly about the lies they tell their kids, especially if they're told to teach them how to be polite, respectful citizens, says Paul Ekman, a psychologist and director of the Paul Ekman group, which counsels organizations on emotional skills and lying.

"You need to talk to your kids about what kind of lies matter," he says. Teaching social graces involves modelling a few white lies. If your kid catches you lying to your neighbour, ask them how you could have handled the situation without lying, he suggests.

Kids naturally learn the acceptable untruths as they get older, says Terry Carson, a certified parenting coach in Toronto.

"Children in that pre-school and toddler group don't always understand the difference between lying and fantasy," she says. "And so when parents get on this high horse and say, 'There's no lying in this house,' they have to be clear that the child understands the difference."

Ms. Catana, for one, stands behind the lies she tells. The paradox of 'do as I say, not as I do' doesn't keep her up at night either.

"I would never lie to hurt them, anything would always be for the preservation of their innocence," she says. "I would hope that by the time they're old enough, to make that differentiation and understand the reasoning behind it."

Harmless?

The White Lie: "Doesn't Aunt Molly's new perm look great?"

Intended effect: Teaching children to be polite. Kids also often overhear white lies parents tell to other adults, such as telling the telemarketer that dad isn't home.

Actual effect: Kids will usually start telling white lies themselves, believing it's the nice thing to do.

The 'Do What I Say or Else' Lie, aka 'the idle threat': "If you don't brush your teeth, all of your molars will fall out."

Intended effect: Making the kids believe something undesirable will happen so they'll behave.

Actual effect: They'll usually believe the parent and comply, though might become unreasonably afraid of the threatened consequence.

The Confidence Boosting Lie: "You're such a good writer!"

Intended effect: Making the child feel good, without having to discuss how they can improve.

Actual effect: Kids might take it as encouragement and an unspoken cue to keep improving. Or they'll think they're great and hold false beliefs about their abilities which will set them up for disappointment in the long run.

The Protective Lie: "The cat must've run away."

Intended Effect: Instead of revealing that kitty was hit by a car, this lie protects the child's feelings, innocence and allows parents to save the tough conversations for another time, such as when the child is old enough to understand.

Actual Effect: Child usually perks up, but might have more follow-up questions which would force the parent to make the lie even more elaborate.

Sarah Boesveld