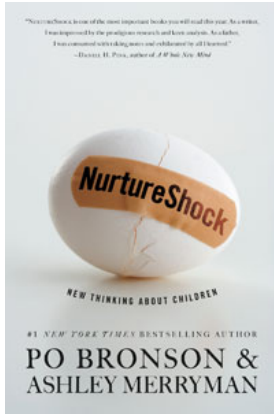


Parenting Tips: Praise Can Be Bad; Lying Is Normal



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Author Po Bronson believes that kids today hear too much praise — much of it unearned. A couple of years ago, he wrote an [article for *New York Magazine* on the subject](#), detailing how praise does not, in fact, lead to self-esteem and achievement as many parents seem to believe.

"Children today hear so much praise that they have decoded its real meaning," he explains to Robert Siegel. "When kids fail and all we do is praise them, there's a lot of duplicity in that, and kids begin to hear 'Nothing matters to my parents more than me doing great or me being smart,' and failure becomes almost a taboo subject."

Bronson expands on the subject of praise — and other child-rearing issues — in his new book *NurtureShock*, which he

co-authored with Ashley Merryman.

NurtureShock

Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman
Hardcover, 352 pages
Twelve
List Price: \$24.99

He says he first became aware of the issue of overpraise as the coach of his son's kindergarten soccer team: "Until that point, I was telling the kids constantly, 'You're great, you're doing well' — even when they were dribbling the wrong way on the field."

[Read An Excerpt.](#)

But once he read the research on the praise, Bronson says, he decided to change the way he spoke to kids. Instead of offering praise indiscriminately, Bronson focused on saying things that the kids would perceive as sincere.

"Over time, I learned to let kids develop their own judgment about how well they had done," he says.

In addition to praise, Bronson and Merryman also tackle the subject of why children lie — and what parents can do about it. Lying, Bronson says, is a normal part of development.



"Almost all kids will experiment with lying at least by the age of 4," he explains. "We should expect all children to attempt lying. The question is, 'What do we do with it over time?'"

Bronson advises parents not to threaten lying children with punishment: "It turns out that increasing the threat of punishment only turns kids into better and more frequent liars," he says.

Po Bronson is the author of five books, including *What Should I Do With My Life?*.

Instead, he recommends that parents pause children in the

moment before they suspect a lie may be coming and say, "You make me really happy if you tell me the truth."

As for teenagers, Bronson says the best way to discourage lying is to set consistent rules, but to leave the door open to some negotiation.

"We're raised on this idea that 'no must mean no' ... but when [children] are older, we need to see that some arguing with parents is actually a good thing — not a bad thing," he says.

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"[Teenagers often feel that] they have two choices: telling you the truth and leading to an argument, or just outright lying. Arguing over the actual rules is a better alternative and a very different thing than arguing over your authority as a parent to set rules," Bronson says.

Excerpt: 'NurtureShock'

by PO BRONSON AND ASHLEY MERRYMAN

NurtureShock

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Hardcover, 352 pages

Chapter Four: Why Kids Lie

We may treasure honesty, but the research is clear. Most classic strategies to promote truthfulness just encourage kids to be better liars.

Twelve
List Price: \$24.99

Ashley and I went to Montreal to visit the lab and operations of Dr. Victoria Talwar, one of the world's leading experts on children's lying behavior. Talwar is raven-haired and youthful, with an unusual accent — the combined result of Irish and Indian family ancestry, a British upbringing, and stints in American, Scottish, and Quebecois academia. Her lab is in a Gothic Revival limestone mansion, overlooking the main campus of McGill University.

Almost immediately, Talwar recruited us for one of her ongoing experiments. She threw us in a small room with two of her students, Simone Muir and Sarah-Jane Renaud, who showed Ashley and me eight videos of children telling a story about a time they were bullied. Our role was to determine which kids were telling the truth and which had made their story up, as well as to rate how confident we were that our determination was correct.

The children ranged in age from seven to eleven years old. Each video segment began with an offscreen adult asking the child a leading question to get the story started, such as, "So tell me what happened when you went to Burger King?" In response, the child told her story over the next two and a half minutes, with the occasional gentle prod for details by the adult who was interviewing her. Those two-plus minutes were an extensive length of time for the child, offering plenty of chances to include contradictory details or hints that might give away her lie.

This format was crafted to simulate the conditions of children testifying in court cases, which is where the modern science of kids' lies began. Over 100,000 children testify in American courts every year, usually in custody disputes and abuse cases.

In those cases, children are frequently coached by someone to shape their story, so the children in Talwar's experiment were also coached, briefly, by their parents the night before. To prepare the videotape, each child rehearsed a true story and a fabricated tale, and told both stories to the interviewer on camera. The interviewer herself did not know which story was true. Then, one of the child's stories was included in the videotapes of eight. The stories chosen for the tapes were not picked because the child did an especially great job of lying. They were merely picked at random.

The adorable little girl with the Burger King story told how she was teased by a boy for being Chinese, and how he threw some French fries in her hair. I froze — would a total stranger throw fries in a girl's hair? She looked so young, and yet the story came out in full, complete — rehearsed? Just guessing, I marked this as a fabrication, but noted my confidence was nil. My confidence didn't improve with the next two children's stories.

"This is hard," I murmured, surprised that I didn't have the answers immediately. I pushed myself closer to the video monitor and cranked the volume up as loud as it could go.

Another girl told of being teased and left out of her group of friends after she scored 100 on a math test. She told her story with scant details and needed a lot of prodding; to me, that seemed genuine, childlike.

After the test, Ashley and I were scored. To my dismay, I got only four right. Ashley got only three correct.

Our results were not unusual. Talwar has run hundreds of people through this test, and on the whole, their results are no better than chance. People simply cannot tell when kids are lying. Their scores also tend to reveal some biases. They believe girls are telling the truth more than boys, when in fact boys do not lie more often. They believe younger kids are more prone to lying, whereas the opposite is true. And they believe introverts are less trustworthy, when introverts actually lie less often, lacking the social skills to pull off a lie.

There are many lie-detection systems created from the patterns in verbal and nonverbal behavior in adult lies, but these provide only small statistical advantages. Voice pitch, pupil dilation, eye tracking, lack of sensory details, and chronological storytelling are some indication of lying in adults. However, when accounting for the wild standard deviation of these behaviors in kids, those higher-than-average indicators become not much more reliable than flipping a coin.

Thus, police officers score worse than chance — at about 45%. Customs officers are trained to interview children during immigration processing and instantly determine if a child has been taken from his parents. Yet they, too, only score at chance on Talwar's test.

Talwar's students Muir and Renaud have run several versions of the experiment with both parents and teachers. "The teachers will score above chance — 60% — but they get really upset if they didn't get 100%," said Muir. "They insist they'd do better with their own students."

Similarly, the parent's first defense against his child's tendency to lie is, "Well, I can tell when they're

lying." Talwar's proven that to be a myth.

One might object that these bullying videotapes aren't like real lies, invented under pressure. They were coached, and the kid wasn't trying to get away with anything.

But Talwar has a variety of experiments where she tempts children to cheat in a game, which puts them in a position to offer real lies about their cheating. She videotapes these, too, and when she shows those videotapes to the child's *own* parent — and asks, "Is your child telling the truth?" — the parents score only slightly better than chance.

They don't take it well, either. When Renaud's on the telephone with parents to schedule the experiments, "They all believe that their kids aren't going to lie." Talwar explained that a number of parents come to her lab really wanting to use their kids' performance to prove to a verified expert what a terrific parent they are.

The truth bias is a painful one to overcome.

The next day, we saw that in action.

* * *

"My son doesn't lie," insisted Steve, a slightly frazzled father in his mid-thirties, as he watched Nick, his eager six-year-old, enthralled in a game of marbles with a McGill student. Steve was quite proud of his son, describing him as easygoing and very social. He had Nick bark out an impressive series of addition problems that Nick had memorized, as if that was somehow proof of Nick's sincerity.

Steve then took his assertion down a notch. "Well, I've never heard him lie." Perhaps that, too, was a little strong. "I'm sure he must lie, some, but when I hear it, I'll still be surprised." He had brought his son in after seeing an advertisement of Talwar's in a local parenting magazine, which had the headline, "Can your child tell the difference between the truth and a lie?" The truth was, Steve was torn. He was curious if Nick would lie, but he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer. The idea of his son being dishonest with him was profoundly troubling.

Steve had an interesting week ahead of him, because Dr. Talwar had just asked Steve to keep a diary for the coming week, documenting every lie that his son told over the next seven days. And I knew for a fact his son did lie — I'd seen him do it.

Nick thought he'd spent the hour playing a series of games with a couple of nice women. First having played marbles in the cheery playroom, Nick then played more games with the women, one-on-one. He was in no real hurry to leave the lab, with its yellow-painted walls decorated with dozens of children's drawings and shelves full of toys. He'd won two prizes, a cool toy car and a bag of plastic dinosaurs, and everyone said he did very well.

What the first-grader didn't know was that those games — fun as they were — were really a battery of psychological tests, and the women were Talwar's trained researchers earning doctorates in child psychology. The other key fact Nick didn't know was that when he was playing games one-on-one, there was a hidden camera taping his every move and word. In an adjacent room, Ashley and I watched the whole thing from a monitor.

Nick cheated, then he lied, and then he lied again. He did so unhesitatingly, without a single glimmer of remorse. Instead, he later beamed as everyone congratulated him on winning the games: he told me he couldn't wait to come back the next weekend to play more games. If I didn't know what was going on, I'd have thought he was a young sociopath in the making. I still actually wonder if that's the case, despite Talwar's assurances to the contrary.

One of Talwar's experiments, a variation on a classic experiment known as the temptation paradigm, is known in the lab as "The Peeking Game." Courtesy of the hidden camera, we'd watched Nick play it with another one of Talwar's graduate students, Cindy Arruda. She took Nick into a very small private room and told him they were going to play a guessing game. Nick turned and straddled his chair to face the wall, while Arruda would bring out a toy that made a sound. Nick had to guess the identity of the toy based on the sound that it had made. If he was right three times, he'd win a prize.

The first toy was easy. Nick bounced in his chair with excitement when he'd figured out that the siren was from a police car. The second toy emitted a baby's cry — it took Nick a couple tries before he landed on "baby doll." He was relieved to finally be right.

"Does it get harder every time?" he asked, obviously concerned, as he pressed the baby doll's tummy to trigger another cry.

"Uh, no," Arruda stammered, despite knowing it was indeed about to get harder for Nick.

Nick turned back to the wall, waiting for the last toy. His small figure curled up over the back of the chair as if he was playing a wonderful game of hide-and-seek.

Arruda brought out a soft, stuffed soccer ball, and placed it on top of a greeting card that played music. She cracked the card for a moment, triggering it to play a music box jingle of Beethoven's "Für Elise."

Nick, of course, was stumped.

Before he had a chance to guess, Arruda suddenly said that she'd forgotten something and had to leave the room for a little bit, promising to be right back. She admonished Nick not to peek at the toy while she was gone.

Five seconds in, Nick was struggling not to peek — he started to turn around but fought the urge and looked back at the wall before he saw anything. He held out for another eight seconds, but the temptation was too great. At thirteen seconds, he gave in. Turning to look, he saw the soccer ball, then immediately returned to his "hide-and-seek" position.

When Arruda returned, she'd barely come through the door before Nick — still facing the wall as if he had never peeked — burst out with the fact that the toy was a soccer ball. We could hear the triumph in his voice — until Arruda stopped him short, telling Nick to wait for her to get seated.

That mere split-second gave Nick just enough time to realize that he should sound unsure of his answer, or else she would know he'd peeked. Suddenly, the glee was gone, and he sounded a little more hesitant. "A soccer ball?" he asked, making it sound like a pure guess.

When he turned around to face Arruda and see the revealed toy, Arruda told Nick he was right, and he acted very pleased.

Arruda then asked Nick if he had peeked when she was away.

"No," he said, quick and expressionless. Then a big smile spread across his face.

Without challenging him, or even letting a note of suspicion creep into her voice, Arruda asked Nick how he'd figured out the sound came from a soccer ball.

Nick shrank down in his seat for a second, cupping his chin in his hands. He knew he needed a plausible answer, but his first attempt wasn't close. With a perfectly straight face he said, "The music had sounded like a ball." Hunting for a better answer, but not getting any closer to it, he added, "The ball sounded black and white." His face gave no outward indication that he realized this made no sense, but he kept on talking, as if he felt he needed something better. Then Nick said that the music sounded like the soccer balls he played with at school: they squeaked. He nodded — this was the good one to go with — and then further explained that the music sounded like the squeak he heard when he kicked a ball. To emphasize this, his winning point, he brushed his hand against the side of the toy ball, as if to demonstrate the way his foot kicking the side of the ball produces a squeaking sound.

This experiment was not just a test to see if children cheat and lie under temptation. It's also designed to test children's ability to extend a lie, offering plausible explanations and avoiding what the scientists call "leakage" — inconsistencies that reveal the lie for what it is. Nick's whiffs at covering up his lie would be scored later by coders who watched the videotape. So Arruda accepted without question the fact that soccer balls play Beethoven when they're kicked and gave Nick his prize. He was thrilled.

* * *

A number of scholars have used variations of this temptation paradigm to test thousands of children over the last few years. What they've learned has turned conventional assumptions upside down.

The first thing they've learned is that children learn to lie much earlier than we presumed. In Talwar's peeking game, only a third of the three-year-olds will peek, and when asked if they peeked, most of them will admit it. But over 80% of the four-year-olds peek. Of those, over 80% will lie when asked, asserting they haven't peeked. By their fourth birthday, almost all kids will start experimenting with lying. Children with older siblings seem to learn it slightly earlier.

Parents often fail to address early childhood lying, since the lying is almost innocent — their child's too young to know what lies are, or that lying's wrong. When their child gets older and learns those distinctions, the parents believe, the lying will stop. This is dead wrong, according to Dr. Talwar. The better a young child can distinguish a lie from the truth, the more likely she is to lie given the chance. Researchers test children with elegant anecdotes, and ask, "Did Suzy tell a lie or tell the truth?" The kids who know the difference are also the most prone to lie. Ignorant of this scholarship, many parenting web sites and books advise parents to just let lies go — kids will grow out of it. The truth is, kids grow into it.

In studies where children are observed in their homes, four-year-olds will lie once every two hours, while a six-year-old will lie about once every hour. Few kids are an exception. In these same studies, 96% of all kids offer up lies.

Most lies to parents are a cover-up of a transgression. First, the kid does something he shouldn't; then, to squirm out of trouble, he denies doing it. But this denial is so expected, and so common, that it's usually dismissed by parents. In those same observational studies, researchers report that in less than one percent of such situations does a parent use the tacked-on lie as a chance to teach a lesson about lying. The parent censures the original transgression, but not the failed cover-up. From the kid's point of view, his attempted lie didn't cost him extra.

Simultaneously as they learn to craft and maintain a lie, kids also learn what it's like to be *lied to*. But children don't start out thinking lies are okay, and gradually realize they're bad. The opposite is true. They start out thinking all deception — of any sort — is bad, and slowly realize that some types are okay.

In a now classic study by University of Queensland's Dr. Candida Peterson, adults and children of different ages watched ten videotaped scenarios of different lies — from benevolent white lies to manipulative whoppers. Children are much more disapproving of lies and liars than adults are; children are more likely to think the liar is a bad person and the lie is morally wrong.

The qualifying role of intent seems to be the most difficult variable for children to grasp. Kids don't even believe a mistake is an acceptable excuse. The only thing that matters is that the information was wrong.

According to Dr. Paul Ekman, a pioneer of lying research at UC San Francisco, here's an example of how that plays out. On the way home from school on Tuesday, a dad promises his five-year-old son that he'll take him to the baseball game on Saturday afternoon. When they get home, Dad learns from Mom that earlier in the day, she had scheduled a swim lesson for Saturday afternoon and can't change it. When they tell their son, he gets terribly upset, and the situation melts down. Why is the kid so upset? Dad didn't know about the swim lesson. By the adult definition, Dad did not lie. But by the kid definition, Dad did lie. Any false statement — regardless of intent or belief — is a lie. Therefore, unwittingly, Dad has given his child the message that he condones lies.

* * *

The second lesson is that while we think of truthfulness as a young child's paramount virtue, it's lying that is the more advanced skill. A child who is going to lie must recognize the truth, intellectually conceive of an alternate reality, and be able to convincingly sell that new reality to someone else. Therefore, lying demands both advanced cognitive development and social skills that honesty simply doesn't require. "It's a developmental milestone," Talwar has concluded.

Indeed, kids who start lying at two or three — or who can control verbal leakage at four or five — do better on other tests of academic prowess. "Lying is related to intelligence," confirmed Talwar, "but you still have to deal with it."

When children first begin lying, they lie to avoid punishment, and because of that, they lie indiscriminately — whenever punishment seems to be a possibility. A three-year-old will say, "I didn't hit my sister," even though a parent witnessed the child hit her sibling. A six-year-old won't make that mistake — she'll lie only about a punch that occurred when the parent was out of the room.

By the time a child reaches school age, her reasons for lying are more complex. Punishment is a primary catalyst for lying, but as kids develop empathy and become more aware of social relations, they start to consider others when they lie. They may lie to spare a friend's feelings. In grade school, said Talwar, "secret keeping becomes an important part of friendship — and so lying may be a part of that."

Lying also becomes a way to increase a child's power and sense of control — by manipulating friends with teasing, by bragging to assert his status, and by learning that he can fool his parents.

Thrown into elementary school, many kids begin lying to their peers as a coping mechanism: it's a way to vent frustration or get attention. They might be attempting to compensate, feeling they're slipping behind their peers. Any sudden spate of lying, or dramatic increase in lying, is a sign that something has changed in that child's life, in a way that troubles him: "Lying is a symptom — often of a bigger problem behavior," explained Talwar. "It's a strategy to keep themselves afloat."

In longitudinal studies, a six-year-old who lies frequently could just as simply grow out of it. But if lying has become a successful strategy for handling difficult social situations, she'll stick with it. About one-third of kids do — and if they're still lying at seven, then it seems likely to continue. They're hooked.

* * *

In Talwar's peeking game, sometimes the researcher pauses the game with, "I'm about to ask you a question. But before I do that, will you promise to tell the truth?" (Yes, the child answers.) "Okay, did you peek at the toy when I was out of the room?" This promise cuts down lying by 25%.

In other scenarios, Talwar's researcher will read the child a short storybook before she asks about the peeking. One of the stories read aloud is *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* — the version in which both the boy and the sheep get eaten because of his repeated lies. Alternatively, they read the story of *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*, in which young George confesses to his father that he chopped down the prized tree with his new hatchet. The story ends with his father's reply: "George, I'm glad that you cut down that cherry tree after all. Hearing you tell the truth is better than if I had a thousand cherry trees."

Now if you had to guess, which story would you think reduced lying more? We ran a poll on our web site, receiving over a thousand responses to that question. Of them, 75% said *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* would work better. However, this famous fable, told all around the world, actually did not cut down lying at all in Talwar's experiments. In fact, after hearing the story, kids lied even a little more than usual.

Meanwhile, hearing *George Washington and the Cherry Tree* reduced lying a whopping 75% in boys, and 50% in girls.

We might think that the story works because Washington's a national icon — that kids are taught to emulate the honesty of our nation's founder — but Talwar's kids are Canadian, and the youngest kids have never even heard of him. To determine if Washington's celebrity was an influential factor for the older kids, Talwar re-ran the experiment, replacing Washington with a nondescript character, and otherwise leaving the story intact. The story's generic version had the same result.

Why does one fable work so well, while the other doesn't — and what does this tell us about how to teach kids to lie less?

The shepherd boy ends up suffering the ultimate punishment, but that lies get punished is not news to children. When asked if lies are *always* wrong, 92% of five-year-olds say yes. And when asked *why* lies are wrong, most say the problem with lying is you get punished for it. In that sense, young kids process the risk of lying by considering only their own self-protection. It takes years for the children to understand lying on a more sophisticated moral ground. It isn't until age eleven that the majority demonstrate awareness of its harm to others; at that point, 48% say the problem with lying is that it destroys trust, and 22% say it carries guilt. Even then, a third still say the problem with lying is being punished.

As an example of how strongly young kids associate lying with punishment, consider this: 38% of five-year-olds rate *profanity* as a lie. Why would kids think swearing is a lie? It's because in their minds, lies are the things you say that get you punished or admonished. Swearing gets you admonished. Therefore, swearing is a lie.

Increasing the threat of punishment for lying only makes children hyperaware of the potential personal cost. It distracts the child from learning how his lies impact others. In studies, scholars find that kids who live in threat of consistent punishment don't lie less. Instead, they become better liars, at an earlier age — learning to get caught less often. Talwar did a version of the peeking game in western Africa, with children who attend a traditional colonial school. In this school, Talwar described, "The teachers would slap the children's heads, hit them with switches, pinch them, for anything — forgetting a pencil, getting homework wrong. Sometimes, a good child would be made to enforce the bad kid." While the North American kids usually peek within five seconds, "Children in this school took longer to peek — 35 seconds, even 58 seconds. But just as many peeked. Then they lied and continued to lie. They go for broke because of the severe consequences of getting caught." Even three-year-olds pretended they didn't know what the toy was, though they'd just peeked. They understood that naming the toy was to drop a clue, and the temptation of being right didn't outweigh the risk of being caught. They were able to completely control their verbal leakage — an ability that still eluded six-year-old Nick.

But just removing the threat of punishment is not enough to extract honesty from kids. In yet another variation, Talwar's researchers promise the children, "I will not be upset with you if you peeked. It doesn't matter if you did." Parents try a version of this routinely. But this alone doesn't reduce lying at all. The children are still wary; they don't trust the promise of immunity. They're thinking, "*My parent really wishes I didn't do it in the first place; if I say I didn't, that's my best chance of making my parent happy.*"

Meaning, in these decisive moments, they want to know how to get back into your good graces. So it's not enough to say to a six-year old, "I will not be upset with you if you peeked, and if you tell the truth you'll be really happy with yourself." That does reduce lying — quite a bit — but a six-year-old doesn't

want to make himself happy. He wants to make the parent happy.

What really works is to tell the child, "I will not be upset with you if you peeked, and if you tell the truth, I will be really happy." This is an offer of both immunity and a clear route back to good standing. Talwar explained this latest finding: "Young kids are lying to make you happy — trying to please you." So telling kids that the truth will make a parent happy challenges the kid's original thought that hearing good news — not the truth — is what will please the parent.

That's why *George Washington and the Cherry Tree* works so well. Little George receives both immunity and praise for telling the truth.

Ultimately, it's not fairy tales that stop kids from lying — it's the process of socialization. But the wisdom in *The Cherry Tree* applies: according to Talwar, parents need to teach kids the worth of honesty just as much as they need to say that lying is wrong. The more kids hear that message, the more quickly they will take this lesson to heart.

* * *

The other reason children lie, according to Talwar, is that they learn it from us.

Talwar challenged that parents need to really consider the importance of honesty in their own lives. Too often, she finds, parents' own actions show kids an ad hoc appreciation of honesty. "We don't explicitly tell them to lie, but they see us do it. They see us tell the telemarketer, 'I'm just a guest here.' They see us boast and lie to smooth social relationships."

Consider how we expect a child to act when he opens a gift he doesn't like. We expect him to swallow all his honest reactions — anger, disappointment, frustration — and put on a polite smile. Talwar runs an experiment where children play various games to win a present, but when they finally receive the present, it's a lousy bar of soap. After giving the kids a moment to overcome the shock, a researcher asks them how they like it. Talwar is testing their ability to offer a white lie, verbally, and also to control the disappointment in their body language. About a quarter of preschoolers can lie that they like the gift — by elementary school, about half. Telling this lie makes them extremely uncomfortable, especially when pressed to offer a few reasons for why they like the bar of soap. They frown; they stare at the soap and can't bring themselves to look the researcher in the eye. Kids who shouted with glee when they won the peeking game suddenly mumble quietly and fidget.

Meanwhile, the child's parent is watching. They almost cheer when the child comes up with the white lie. "Often the parents are proud that their kids are 'polite' — they don't see it as lying," Talwar remarked. Despite the number of times she's seen it happen, she's regularly amazed at parents' apparent inability to recognize that a white lie is still a lie.

When adults are asked to keep diaries of their own lies, they admit to about one lie per every five social interactions, which works out to about one per day, on average. (College students are double that.) The vast majority of these lies are white lies meant to make others feel good, like telling the woman at work who brought in muffins that they taste great.

Encouraged to tell so many white lies, children gradually get comfortable with being disingenuous. Insincerity becomes, literally, a daily occurrence. They learn that honesty only creates conflict, while dishonesty is an easy way to avoid conflict. And while they don't confuse white-lie situations with lying to cover their misdeeds, they bring this emotional groundwork from one circumstance to the other. It becomes easier, psychologically, to lie to a parent. So if the parent says, "Where did you get these Pokemon cards?! I told you, you're not allowed to waste your allowance on Pokemon cards!," this may feel to the child very much like a white-lie scenario — he can make his father feel better by telling him the cards were extras from a friend.

Now, compare this to the way children are taught not to tattle. Children will actually start tattling even before they can talk — at around the age of fourteen months, they'll cry, point, and use their gaze to signal their mother for help when another child has stolen a toy or cookie. Appealing to grownups becomes a habit, and around the age of four, children start to hear a rule to rid them of this habit: "Don't Tell," or "Don't Tattle."

What grownups really mean by "Don't Tell" is we want children to learn to work it out with one another, first. Kids need the social skills to resolve problems, and they won't develop these skills if a parent always intrudes. Kids' tattles are, occasionally, outright lies, and children can use tattling as a way to get even. When parents preach "Don't Tell," we're trying to get all these power games to stop.

Preschool and elementary school teachers proclaim tattling to be the bane of their existence. One of the largest teachers' training programs in the United States ranks children's tattling as one of the top five classroom concerns — as disruptive as fighting or biting another classmate.

But tattling has received some scientific interest, and researchers have spent hours observing kids at play. They've learned that nine out of ten times a kid runs up to a parent to tell, that kid is being completely honest. And while it might seem to a parent that tattling is incessant, to a child that's not the case — because for every one time a child seeks a parent for help, there were fourteen other instances when he was wronged and did not run to the parent for aid.

When the child — who's put up with as much as he can handle — finally comes to tell the parent the honest truth, he hears, in effect, "Stop bringing me your problems!" According to one researcher's work, parents are *ten times* more likely to chastise a child for tattling than they are to chide a child who lied.

Kids pick up on the power of "Don't Tell" and learn they can silence one another with it. By the middle years of elementary school, being labeled a tattler is about the worst thing a kid can be called on the playground. So a child considering reporting a problem to an adult not only faces peer condemnation as a traitor and the schoolyard equivalent of the death penalty — ostracism — but he also recalls every time he's heard teachers and parents say, "Work it out on your own."

Each year, the problems kids deal with become exponentially bigger. They watch other kids vandalize walls, shoplift, cut class, and climb fences into places they shouldn't be. To tattle about any of it is to act like a little kid, mortifying to any self-respecting tweener. Keeping their mouth shut is easy; they've been encouraged to do so since they were little.

The era of holding information back from parents has begun.

* * *

For two decades, parents have rated "honesty" as the trait they most want in their children. Other traits, such as confidence or good judgment, don't even come close. On paper, the kids are getting this message. In surveys, 98% said that trust and honesty were essential in a personal relationship. Depending on their age, 96% to 98% will say lying is morally wrong.

But this is only lip service, for both parties. Studies show that 96% of kids lie to their parents, yet lying has never been the #1 topic on the parenting boards or on the benches at the playgrounds.

Having lying on my radar screen has changed the way things work around the Bronson household. No matter how small, lies no longer go unnoticed. The moments slow down, and I have a better sense of how to handle them.

A few months ago my wife was on the phone making arrangements for a babysitter. She told the sitter that my son was six years old, so that the sitter knew what age-level games to bring. Luke started protesting, loudly, interrupting my wife. Whereas before I'd have been perplexed or annoyed at my son's sudden outburst, now I understood. My son was, technically, still a week away from his sixth birthday, which he was treasuring in anticipation. So in his mind, his mom *lied* — about something *really* important to him. At his developmental stage, the benign motivation for the lie was irrelevant. The second Michele got off the phone, I explained to her why he was so upset; she apologized to him and promised to be more exact. He immediately calmed down.

Despite his umbrage at others' lies, Luke's not beyond attempting his own cover-ups. Just the other day, he came home from school having learned a new phrase and a new attitude — quipping "I don't care," snidely, and shrugging his shoulders to everything. He was suddenly acting like a teenager, unwilling to finish his dinner or complete his homework. He repeated "I don't care" so many times I finally got frustrated and demanded to know if someone at school had taught him this dismissive phrase.

He froze. And I could suddenly intuit the debate running through his head: should he lie to his dad, or rat out his friend? I knew from Talwar's research that I'd lose that one. Recognizing this, I stopped him and I told him that if he'd learned the phrase at school, he did not have to tell me *who* had taught him the phrase. Telling me the truth was not going to get his friends in trouble.

"Okay," he said, relieved. "I learned it at school." Then he told me he *did* care, and gave me a hug. I haven't heard that phrase again.

Does how we deal with a child's lies really matter, down the road in life? The irony of lying is that it's both normal and abnormal behavior at the same time. It's to be expected, and yet it can't be disregarded.

Dr. Bella DePaulo has devoted much of her career to adult lying.

In one study, she had both college students and community members enter a private room, equipped with an audiotape recorder. Promising them complete confidentiality, DePaulo's team instructed the subjects to recall the worst lie they'd ever told — with all the scintillating details.

"I was fully expecting serious lies," DePaulo remarked. "Stories of affairs kept from spouses, stories of squandering money, or being a salesperson and screwing money out of car buyers." And she did hear those kinds of whoppers, including theft and even one murder. But to her surprise, a lot of the stories told were about situations in which the subject was a mere child — and they were not, at first glance, lies of any great consequence. "One told of eating the icing off a cake, then telling her parents the cake came that way. Another told of stealing some coins from a sibling." As these stories first started trickling in, DePaulo scoffed, thinking, "*C'mon, that's the worst lie you've ever told?*" But the stories of childhood kept coming, and DePaulo had to create a category in her analysis just for them.

"I had to reframe my understanding to consider what it must have been like as a child to have told this lie," she recalled. "For young kids, their lie challenged their self-concept that they were a good child, and that they did the right thing."

Many subjects commented on how that momentous lie early in life established a pattern that affected them thereafter. "We had some who said, 'I told this lie, I got caught, and I felt so badly, I vowed to never do it again.' Others said, 'Wow, I never realized I'd be so good at deceiving my father; I can do this all the time.' The lies they tell early on are meaningful. The way parents react can really affect lying."

Talwar says parents often entrap their kids, putting them in positions to lie and testing their honesty unnecessarily. Last week, I put my three-and-a-half-year-old daughter in that exact situation. I noticed she had scribbled on the dining table with a washable marker. With disapproval in my voice I asked, "Did you draw on the table, Thia?" In the past, she would have just answered honestly, but my tone gave away that she'd done something wrong. Immediately, I wished I could retract the question and do it over. I should have just reminded her not to write on the table, slipped newspaper under her coloring book, and washed the ink away. Instead, I had done exactly what Talwar had warned against.

"No, I didn't," my daughter said, lying to me for the first time.

For that stain, I had only myself to blame.

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J Rhinehart (Jeni) wrote:

Parents aren't perfect, god knows mine weren't. I'm back living with my elderly mother, & it's hell. It's bringing back all the psychological harm she did to me as a child. I could reel off a long list of how she damaged my self-esteem, my trust, my social growth, emotional damage, etc, with her lies. But I won't.

I feel like a survivor of a childhood war. I have never gotten over it. I'm still trying to get out from under.

These 'parenting tips' would not have done my parents any good. I suspect they would not have learned from them. My father might have.

My mother lied to my father all the time. He came to hate her. Yet he never left her, he just drank to avoid her. Lies don't just hurt children, they hurt other adults, too.

What this excerpt didn't point out is adequately that lies are part of a whole outlook. I know of a teen girl who was pregnant & hid it up to & including when she was giving birth. Her mother told me she could not understand it. But then she said all her daughter's life she'd lied to her, even when she whipped her for lying. The mother thought whipping her would cure her of lying, she did not realize it was reinforcing the lying. Her daughter wanted her respect.

Mon Aug 31 14:20:09 2009

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S U. (sundog) wrote:



Who are these people talking about? That never happened in my household/childhood, to the point I was starved for any kind of positive attention. I went out and found it much to everyone's later chagrin. Rush Limbaugh is a __fill in pejorative blank here__ I wouldn't take his advice on raising dangerous viral strains, much less human children. I cannot believe that anyone takes the inventor of the term "Feminazi" as anything other than a misogynist. As for the rest, if parents are offering too much praise, rather than blaming the parent outright, perhaps we need to see what influences the parents are trying to counter? Bullies at school? Teacher Politics at School. Racism, Sexism, Homophobia, and I am sure who other plethoras of negative self-body-mind-identity issues imbedded in our messed up cultural messages about what it means to be a grown woman or a man. And if some parents screw up by worshipping their kids---oh well. There will always be some of that, always have been. There isn't a whole lot to be done about it. But one thing, that sure would be nice, is stop blaming all parents everywhere for this or that stupid parenting trend. I shouldn't have to explain myself to some 20 something childless armchair pop psychologist.

Mon Aug 31 11:38:00 2009

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Bernadette Noll (SlowFamilyLiving) wrote:

I love the idea of cutting back on the praise for kids and have been actively changing my language for the past couple of years. The constant praise is really a judgment being put on by the parents - and I think it teaches kids to look for extrinsic value in all they do. To say "good job" to a kid means you're determining whether it's good or not. To say, "you did it!" leaves them room for investigating how it felt to them. It is my hope that they will then seek intrinsic value in all they do. Do I like it? Does it feel right? Is it resonating with me? But as a parent I admit it's hard to change the language from praise to just serving as a thrilled witness.

http://www.slowfamilyliving.com

Mon Aug 31 10:27:41 2009

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Michelle Zink (pyxiwulf) wrote:

Well, I just spent 2 hours slowly reading and analyzing the concepts discussed and the reflections of them with my 2 children, and I am glad to have such great additional insight. I just wonder if the 17 previous commenters read the excerpt?

Sat Aug 29 13:23:56 2009

[Recommend \(12\)](#)

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Curt Kovacs (docbabe) wrote:

Rush Limbaugh has been mocking this over praise culture for many years. Nice the elites finally woke up.

Sat Aug 29 12:48:29 2009

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Carrie Williamson (williac3) wrote:

Although I hear what he is saying, it should be said with a grain of sand; underprivileged children hear significantly less works of encouragement & significantly more words of criticism & it has huge impacts on their self esteem & ultimately, their ability to stay away from drugs, in school & with a job. All kids do need a significant amount of praise; although I agree we should only give it when they actually deserve it. I work with underprivileged kids who have teachers to call them stupid & disturbed & I can not overemphasize the power of the self-fulfilled prophecy. If you believe a child can do well, they usually will; if not, they will live up to your every expectation. I just hope the message of this man doesn't reach the lower class society, who need to be given the opposite message.

Sat Aug 29 10:56:04 2009

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FRANK BROWN (cfranklin) wrote:

I could never raise another child in this "child centered" society. Hard to believe what we do to our children. Sleep with them, make them live in "safety cells" and sterile environments, worship them.

Fri Aug 28 19:32:43 2009

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Suzy Tyburski (blandandboring) wrote:

Parents have much less effect on their children than they think. Just look at any family with more than one child. They often all turn out to be completely different types of people yet they all had the same parents! Some are average, some spectacular, some are criminals, some are crazy. As far as I'm concerned there is some of romanticizing of parenthood going on. Sorry to kill the buzz.....

Fri Aug 28 19:19:28 2009

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Jordan Huizenga (jhuiz) wrote:

This is an outstanding article to get out to parents and teachers. Praising children is one of the most natural things an early childhood educator can do and it's good to know exactly HOW to do it. The non-profit I work for uses this and other research findings on early child development in our centers to ensure that children are ready for school and life. We have also developed a suite of child developmental products that focus on social emotional development in young children. Check out <http://shop.childreninc.org> for more information

Fri Aug 28 15:24:21 2009

[Recommend \(2\)](#)

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brijesh singh (briju) wrote:

One of the basic principle of parenting is preparing your children for future and the difference between good lie and bad one. Sometime you are in situation (maybe hostage) where good lie may work out in your defense. At the same time, a bad lie (WMD) can make two country fight. So if a child is learning to lie, why it feels bad and wrong whereas it depends upon actuality like white lie is acceptable and feels good.

Fri Aug 28 14:59:26 2009

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