

Transcript

What if you could submit your kids to a lie detector test of sorts, put them in a special room where you could see if they will lie or tell the truth.

These kids have all been told not to turn around in their chairs not to peek at the toy on the table when the grown-up leave the room but time after time after time kids will peek, 80 per cent of them will peek within seconds and then when the grown up returns to the room and asks if the child peeked the kids will lie.

- When I was out of the room, did you stand up and see what the toy was?

- No

That is a lie

- Did you turn round and peek at the toy when I was gone?

- No

Another lie

- Did you turn round and look what the toy was?

- No

Lie, after lie after lie ... In fact 74% of kids between the ages of 4 and 7 who peeked will lie about it

- When I was out of the room, did you turn round and look to see what the toy was? No?

These are absolutely not bad children, these are very typical children, it is a natural, normal development that children will occasionally tell lies.

Lying in kids is normal, natural? Well yes, lying is a positive developmental milestone according to professor Victoria Talwar and her team of research assistants at Montreal's McGill University they are studying how lying fits into normal brain development

It's a part of normal development and understanding the difference between what's true and convincing someone else of an altered truth — actually really takes a lot of intelligence to do that,

Intelligence? Kids who lie are smart? In a way yes

- The phrase "kids lying" sounds like, instinctively sounds like a bad thing, but in your lab, I get the sense that you are kind of neutral about whether it is good or bad for kids to lie

- The fact is that lying is not a good behavior. It's very clear in society we don't like people to lie ... on the other hand, lying is a good thing in that it is a by-product of a positive development in children. So when we see lying in children, it's actually a marker of this ability to understand someone else's perspective and what is going through other people's mind"

- Which is a good thing ...

- Which is a good thing because it's really important part of our social communication, to be able to communicate effectively with people, to understand what they are thinking, what they know, makes us better communicators ...

- and out of that can grow empathy, and sympathy ...

- empathy and sympathy

- it's interesting that you are saying that it seems developmentally that what we think of as good abilities like being able to sympathize and to empathize, to communicate, that the root to that passes through the phase of figuring out how to tell a good lie

- yes, yes is like all the skills that you need that are very important for positive development are skills that can be used to tell a lie. So what you have is that it really is a marker of this increasing cognitive sophistication in children's development and in their complexity of thought

Measuring that "complexity of thought" is tricky. After all, how do you really know if a person is lying? You can't ask them if they're lying, because, they could lie to you. So Doctor Talwar designed this experiment:

- So, this is the child's ... the child sits here
- The child sits here
- And you can have a tester in that chair ...
- Researcher
- Researcher
- Yes, the researcher sits across here
- And over your shoulder
- And over here is the hidden camera, that catches the child's behaviour, this way catching over the researcher's shoulder
- So, I'm looking at this angle I just see a reflection but now looking back the other way, this is actually beyond the camera that you record everything
- That's right

The kids play a simple game in order to win a prize they have to face the wall and based only on the sounds they hear they have to guess what the toy on the table is: Sirens, a police car. Crying, a baby, and then comes the real test:

- and we leave a toy that makes no noise, has no sound that you can pass and we put that on the table and we put a different clue, an audio clue. So this time the audio clue is nothing to do in this case with Sponge Bob ...
- So there's no way that that sound can lead you to Sponge Bob
- There's no way you can guess what it is just by listening
- So if Sponge Bob is your answer it means that you peeked
- It means that you peeked
- I have to imagine now that I'm sitting in this room in this sort of table, picturing myself, 5 years old and the grown-up leaves the room, and I know there's a prize at stake if I can guess ... the temptation must be enormous
- We create that situation because then they can choose whether they confess up to doing it or whether they conceal and lie about doing it.

It is a fascinating experiment, watching these researchers who in a way aren't all that honest themselves about what is really going on here

- They are lying
- And watching the parents secretly watch their kids lie. There's a real sense of drama here.

Lea, who is 4, and Aleko, 6, were two recent subjects. Lea went first and the interesting thing about watching her dad John watch her: he is a police officer and his specialty is interrogation.

- Will it upset you to see her do that, or rather because ...
- No, no, well I don't know, my wife ... I don't think it will upset me ...

Lea peeks but when asked if she peeked then she tells the truth

That has less to do with the fact that her dad is a cop than it does with the fact that she's a kid. Most young kids don't yet know how to lie well. They have yet to learn how to do it.

- So you got to be fairly sophisticated to be able to lie ...
- Yes, You have to be able to remember everything you've said before so you keep consistency in your lie, you can't be caught out,
- You have to put yourself also in the other person's shoes. The persons who suspects you, you've got to think about what they are thinking and figure out how to dodge that
- You have to be able to think, 'Okay, so they think that I did this, therefore they're going to expect my answers to be along these lines so they have to keep a representation of not only what they really did, but what the other person thinks they did and what that person's expectations would be ... so they have to keep, requires a lot of a lot of mental flexibility and also be able to keep sort of this alternate representation of an alternate reality in their mind to keep the story consistent.
- Stay turned round I'll be right back okay?

Now look at Aleko, Lea's brother. He is 6. He peeks and when asked, well he knows he is on the verge of getting caught and probably figures is better not to say anything. Not quite a lie, but he is definitely weighing his options: lie or confess? in the end choosing to take the 5th

- we have to be careful that we don't come, that we don't say to a child 'Oh, it's terrible that a child lies' and remember that you know adults are doing it too. And it's an adult behavior more so than a child behavior. Children are actually more likely to actually be blunt truth tellers compared to adults, but the other thing is that children often are picking up on the little lies that we're telling.
- So where do you think they are learning it, from their parents?
- I think for the most part that kids, you know, they have that innocence and they slowly lose it because of us, I mean and everything is a learned behavior but you are trying and teach them as best as you can,
- it's just not so clear-cut as we want it to be
- No, it's not

So what is a parent to do, specially considering this little note from one of Talwar's research assistants:

When kids realise that they are about to get in trouble, that they are about to be punished for whatever they have done they are more likely to lie

- Where we are trying to help parents, you know is when you first see your child lying to you don't ... the natural reaction often to react emotionally, to be upset 'Oh, my goodness my child's just lied to me' but to realise that it's a natural part of the development that will try and do this and that we really want to talk to them calmly and rationally about the importance of not lying and also modelling that behaviour in ourselves because they learn from our behaviour and how we act and also ...
- that means we can never lie in front of our children
- it means that if you want them to be telling the truth then it's important that you are not turning around and lying all over the place as well

And there you have the key piece of advice for us grown ups