

METHODS FOR PROMOTING HONESTY IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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Abstract

Deceptive behavior emerges early during preschool age and is usually used by young children to conceal a misdeed or obtain a reward. Lie-telling can lead to decreased trustworthiness and might have a negative impact on social relationships. Therefore, it is important for professionals working with children to promote the development of moral values, with a particular emphasis on honesty. In this paper we critically analyse some important and novel methods in promoting honesty in young children. Methods such as encouraging children to tell the truth, reading children moral stories, combining moral stories with sharing behavior, or increasing children's self-awareness are methods who increase truthfulness in children and decrease lie-telling behavior. In this theoretical study we also emphasize the role of culture in deceptive behaviour. Future directions about promoting honesty and practical implications are discussed.

Cuvinte-cheie: minciuna, povești morale, onestitate, preșcolari.

Keywords: deception, lie-telling, moral story, honesty, young children.

1. INTRODUCTION

Promoting honesty represents an important goal of moral development and socialization process (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Lie-telling is immoral and is being discouraged as a result of negative impact on social relationships. Lying delivers mixed messages and can be paradoxical: it can be perceived like inappropriate behavior, yet lying can be also encouraged, in situations to protect others.

Deceptive behavior emerges in preschool years, with a growth in frequency with age (Lee, 2013), and by late childhood begins to be very difficult for adults to identify whether a child is lying (Talwar *et al.*, 2004). Given the negative consequences of lie-telling behavior (Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986) interventions in this sensitive period of childhood are essential. Encouraging honesty at a young age represents the main goal of sociomoral behaviors.

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In the present paper, our purpose is to critically analyse different methods used by professional workers, that promote children's honesty. In our analysis we take into account specific paradigms and methods like: encouraging children to tell the truth, reading them moral stories or increasing children's self-awareness, supported by the scientific literature. Our purpose is to present and analyse these methods based on their success in reduction of lie-telling. Also, we discuss the role of culture in deceptive behaviour and we examine the extent to which these methods of promoting honesty can be generalized to other populations and cultures. Finally, these methods can be applied in programs for promoting honesty in young children, useful for professional workers.

2. LIE-TELLING BEHAVIOR IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Children's lie telling behavior emerges in preschool years as an early, normative aspect of development and evolves during in school years (Talwar *et al.*, 2002). From this early age, children are taught that honesty is important and lying is discouraged (Bussey, 1999). Children tell antisocial, as well as prosocial lies. Antisocial lies represent lies motivated by self-interest that violate trust and rules of communication with the intent to harm others or avoid punishment. On the other hand, prosocial lies are told for the benefit of others, are socially motivated, being called "white lies". So, children are also taught that they should not always tell the blunt truth. Also, lying in some situations is inappropriate (e.g. to conceal a transgression) being discouraged. In other situations, it can be used, to strengthen social conventions (e.g. to be polite). Indeed, the literature shows that children from an early age, understand these differences and apply them (Bussey, 1992).

Regarding the development of lie-telling, studies suggest that some children begin to tell lies even in their second year of life (Evans & Lee, 2013; Newton, Reddy, & Bull, 2000). In the first years they tell unsophisticated lies with the purpose to obtain social rewards. Literature shows that they are not doing it with the intention to harm others (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). The most frequent lies that children tell tend to be lies to conceal misdeeds (Newton *et al.*, 2000; Stouthamer-Loeber 1986; Wilson, Smith, & Ross, 2003). As children become older and learn about social norms, they start to tell lies to avoid personal costs. However, lie-telling can become a problematic behavior in terms of frequency or inappropriate use, as children reach late childhood and *adolescence* (Talwar & Crossman, 2011).

When studying lie-telling behavior in children, because it is difficult to investigate this behavior in real life, scientists create naturalistic conditions in which individuals can spontaneously choose to lie or tell the truth, similar to their real life. One natural condition that is frequently used to examine children's lying is the *temptation resistance paradigm* (Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan 1989; Talwar & Lee, 2002, 2008; Sears, Rau, & Alpert, 1965). In this paradigm, children are told they are going to play a guessing game with sounds and after the game the researcher

asks the child not to peek at a covered toy, while being left alone in a room. Most children break the rule, because they fail not to peek at a forbidden toy. When the researcher enters the room, he/she asks children whether they had peeked or not at the toy. Children being unaware that in the room has been a camera recorder, they felt free to tell the truth, or to lie. Studies show that there is an age decrease in peeking behavior, but an age increase in lying behavior. When children tell a lie, they must be able not only to make a false statement, but also to be able to support it, demonstrating in this way a semantic leakage control (Talwar & Lee, 2002). Preschool children are limited in their semantic leakage, but as they get older, they become better in maintaining their lies. For example, Lewis, Stranger & Sullivan (1989) used the temptation resistance paradigm to study 3-year-olds deception to conceal their transgression. From 33 children tested, results showed that 29 peeked at the toy, and 11 children lied about their peeking, and 7 gave no answer, while only 11 children confessed about the peeking. Polak and Harris (1999) replicated the procedure used by Lewis, Stranger & Sullivan (1989) with 3 to 5 year-olds, including a control group of children who were allowed to look at the target toy. The results showed that children, compared with the group who was allowed to look at the toy, peeked at the toy less often. Similarly, Talwar and Lee (2002) found that that most children between 4–7 year olds lied about peeking at the toy and 64% of three-years old children confessed about their peeking. Lee *et al.*, (2014) used the same paradigm and most children peeked at the toy.

3. METHODS TO PROMOTE HONESTY IN CHILDREN

Honesty is valued across cultures, being encouraged in order to acquire desirable sociomoral behaviors. Harm/care and fairness/reciprocity are two of the moral foundations of sociomoral behaviors (Haidt & Joseph, 2004). The negative consequences of lie-telling behavior, as the literature shows, is that antisocial behavior has been linked with lying, delinquency, conduct problems, and disruptive behaviors in adolescence (Ostrov *et al.*, 2008). Given that honesty is important in maintaining and increasing social relationships, developing methods for promoting honesty in young children, whose lies are emerging, seems extremely important. Our paper critically presents strategies and methods that promote honesty in children, methods supported by the scientific literature.

Several studies have experimentally examined methods to promote honesty in children. Techniques are ranging from direct methods, for example simply encouraging children to tell the truth or making them sensitive to the consequences of lie-telling (Lyon, *et al.*, 2008; Talwar, *et al.*, 2004; Talwar, Arruda & Yachison, 2015), to more indirect methods such as reading them moral stories (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Talwar, *et al.*, 2016; Yao & Enright, 2018) or increasing children's self-awareness (Bender, Connor, & Evans, 2018). We will analyse and discuss these methods in the following paragraphs.

3.1. PROMOTING HONESTY BY ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO TELL THE TRUTH

One method to promote children's honesty that seems to be successful is to ask them to promise to tell the truth. Talwar, Lee, Bala *et al.* (2004) conducted a study with 3- to 11-year-old children who observed a wrongdoing and were told by the researcher to deny it. Results show that children who promised to tell the truth were more likely to divulge information about the adult's transgression. Furthermore, Lyon *et al.*, (2008) demonstrated this effect with children aged 4 to 7 years. These studies suggest that children's honesty regarding another's wrongdoing may be reinforced by asking them to behave truthfully.

There is also evidence that children's lying behavior may be influenced by their perceptions of the outcome of lying or telling the truth (Bandura, 1991; Bussey, 1992; Lyon, 2000). For example, Wagland and Bussey (2005) conducted a study and children were told stories about a child character who was asked about a transgression that they were told to keep secret. Results showed that children believed that truth telling would be compromised when punishment was expected

Talwar *et al.*, (2002) studied the children effectiveness of honesty by asking children to tell the truth about their transgression. Results show that for older children rates of lie-telling were reduced by 15% to 30%, but preschool children's behaviors were not influenced by the promise to tell the truth.

Further, Talwar, Arruda, & Yachison (2015) obtain the largest reduction in lie-telling behavior in children found in literature. The rate of lie-telling decreased with 40%. It was used the same temptation to resistance paradigm where children were told not to peek at the toy, while the researcher was out. They examined how different types of verbal appeals can influence children's honesty, ages between 4 to 8 years-old. Verbal appeals that emphasized external and internal social approval focused on the positive *consequences of telling the truth* (e.g. the researcher saying that she would be happy if the children told the truth) resulted in children being more likely to tell the truth about their transgression. In contrast, verbal appeals that emphasized punishment, were not effective in promoting honesty, resulting in children lying about their transgression.

3.2. PROMOTING HONESTY BY MORAL STORIES

An important role in human society has been played by storytelling. It has been used as well for children and for adults. Moral stories has been told for generations due to the important role in teaching children moral values. Moral stories are means of communicating lessons about honesty, important behavior and values about virtuous conduct. From an early age, children are exposed to traditional stories that serve as instruments for conveying cultural values (Henderson & May, 2005; Kim, Green & Klein, 2006). In particular, stories such as *George Washington and the Cherry Tree* and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* are stories used with children in which are discussed anticipated consequences of being honest and dishonest. These

moral stories communicate messages regarding the appropriate ways to behave and the consequences of goodness or correctness of character. There is some evidence suggesting that not all moral stories are efficient in promoting honesty just because of their long history use. The first study which addressed the impact of moral stories on children's honesty was the one conducted by Lee *et al.*, (2014). Children ages between 3 to 7 years participated to the temptation to resistance paradigm, and after the researcher returned, they were assigned to different moral stories. After reading the stories, honesty was examined by one direct question ("Did you peek?") and only the immediate effect of moral storytelling on children's honesty was assessed. Results showed that children were more than three times less likely to lie about peeking at the toy when they heard a story that emphasized the positive effect of telling the truth (*George Washington and the Cherry Tree*) compared with a control story (*The Tortoise and the Hare*). In contrast, other moral stories such as (*The boy who cried wolf*) that underlined the negative effect of dishonesty were ineffective in promoting honesty. Moreover, the effect that the classic moral story had was modest- compared to the control story, with lying decreased by about 18%. There were no age differences.

Another study conducted by Talwar, Yachison, & Leduc (2016) examined the effect of three moral stories on children's reports of another's wrongdoing. Results showed that older children in the positive condition were more likely to tell the truth about a confederate's transgression. There were no differences between the negative and control conditions. They have also examined moral evaluation and the type of story children had been read also had a significant impact on their moral *evaluations* of true and false statements. Children in the negative moral story conditions gave less negative ratings of lies, whereas regarding children in the positive moral story condition, only those who told the truth expressed more positive ratings of truth telling (compared to those who did not tell the truth).

Neither of these studies with moral stories examined the impact of adult coaching on children's lie-telling behavior. The same research group (Talwar *et al.*, 2017) investigated whether the effect of honesty promotion continues to exist when children are faced with external pressures to lie and the ability of children to maintain the secret during the interview. Children aged between 4 to 7 years of age were prompted to remember information about one's transgression. All children were requested to keep a secret about the transgression. Children were assigned to different forms of coaching and moral stories. Results showed that the level of coaching influenced children's ability to conceal information and maintain their lie about a transgression. Furthermore, children in the positive story condition were less likely to maintain their lies than those in the neutral story condition. Also it has been showed that the effect of a positive moral story can be attenuated via intensive lie coaching.

A study which tested the efficiency of moral story condition has been conducted by Sauter *et al.*, (2019). In the behavioral analysis study, researchers evaluated the influence of this moral story and instruction on the consistency of honest reports

adding some actual programmed consequences (rewards or penalties) on older children (7 to 9 year olds) who could cheat on a math test. Results showed that over repeated sessions, there was inconsistent, transient or even no improvement in honest reports following the presentation of moral stories. This study criticizes the results obtained by Lee *et al.*, (2014) that moral story do not produce improvements in the honest reports of children. Results of Sauter *et al.*, (2019) focused the importance of reinforcement for honest confession and coaching for deceptive behavior.

Further, Yao and Enright (2018) revealed that moral stories influence children's sharing behaviour in a preschool sample. Children in the sharing-good-consequences condition shared the most, followed by children in the selfish-bad consequences condition. Children in the control group share the least. So children assigned to the moral story with positive protagonist and good consequences were those who paid more attention to people's needs, retrieved more than children who were assigned to the moral story with negative protagonist and bad consequences. Also, Du and Hao (2018) showed that the group that had read the moral story emphasizing the actor's positive emotions toward his helping behavior revealed more donating intentions. These studies showed that moral stories can be successfully used to promote sharing behavior in preschoolers, revealing that the combination between moral stories and information on consequences can shape children's intentions and their actual prosocial or selfish actions.

3.3. PROMOTING HONESTY BY INCREASING CHILDREN'S SELF-AWARENESS

The last method analyzed in our paper, with the purpose to promote children's honesty is increasing children's awareness. Self-awareness is an internal concentration or focus in which individuals become aware of themselves and of how others perceive them (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). At about 2 years of age, self-awareness is developed in children, as they begin to recognize themselves as individuals (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979). Self-awareness is tested with the Rouge test, where the experimenter makes a red dot on children's face during a game, before they are presented with their reflection in a mirror. Children who recognize the dot on their face are those considered to have self-awareness.

Past research (Ross, Anderson, & Campbell, 2010) has indicated that self-awareness can increase children's propensity to moral norms and moral behaviors. More recently, Bender, O'Connor, & Evans (2018) examined the influence of self-awareness on children's truth and lie-telling behaviors. Children aged 3 or 4 years after participating in the temptation resistance paradigm, were assigned to one of the three conditions: Self-Awareness (a mirror was placed in front of children prior questioning them about the toy), Control (the nonreflective backside of the mirror was placed in front of children prior questioning them about the toy) or Promise (children were asked to promise the truth, prior questioning them about the toy). Results indicated that children in the Self-Awareness condition were significantly less likely to lie compared with the other two conditions. The reduction of lie-telling rates was about 37% in the self-awareness condition.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, we critically analysed methods used with young children in order to promote honesty. Our purpose was to present these methods taking into account their paradigm and their efficiency in decreasing lie-telling. Further, in our discussion section we discuss the role of culture in deceptive behaviour. The present paper could be helpful in choosing different programs for professional workers for promoting honesty. As children begin to use deceptive behavior early during preschool age, there is a need for tools to promote sociomoral behaviors, such as honesty. Honesty has strong implications for trust and the lack of honesty has been linked to important clinical problems, such as antisocial behavior, or disruptive behavior (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Previous past studies had pointed to a number of direct methods that can be effective for promoting honesty, such as telling children to promise to tell the truth or making them sensitive to the consequences of lie-telling (Lyon *et al.*, 2008; Talwar *et al.*, 2002, Talwar *et al.*, 2004; Talwar *et al.*, 2015). Several studies suggested that reading children moral stories that contain a positive message about honesty can also be effective in promoting honesty (Lee *et al.*, 2004). Additional studies combined moral stories with adult coaching on children's lie-telling behavior (Talwar *et al.*, 2018), with programmed consequences such as rewards or penalties (Sauter *et al.*, 2019) or with sharing behavior in preschoolers (Yao and Enright, 2018; Du and Hao, 2018). All these studies were effective in decreasing lie-telling. A last line in promoting honesty is shaped by self-awareness (Bender *et al.*, 2018) showing an increase in truth-telling. All these methods could be used by teachers and parents in order to acquire moral values, such as honesty.

Taking all these together, it is important to have a critical look regarding our present review from a cultural point of view. We need to assess the extent to which these methods can be generalized to other populations and cultures. Future studies should examine different methods for promoting honesty across cultures. What we know for now is that the pattern of lying, as it was assessed by the temptation resistance paradigm has been found to be similar across cultures. For example, children in North America, East Asia, and West Africa show an increase in lying rates after 3 years of age (Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Even though lying rates increase after 3 years age, literature shows that differences in the social environment can affect lying rates. Talwar and Lee (2011) shows that punitive schools were associated with higher rates of lying among young children, due to their aim to cover up their wrongdoings, and to avoid the negative consequences from authority figures. Regarding cultural differences in rates of lying, there seems to be modest rates of lying in Asia, and higher rates of lying in North America (Fu *et al.*, 2016). Also, a study on Romanian preschoolers (Visu-Petra *et al.*, 2014) found a much lower rate of peeking than other studies with children from western cultures. The authors conclude this cultural and educational paradigm difference occurred because

their sample consisted of children from public kindergartens, where discipline is strongly enforced, thus making Romanian children more obedient. Also, cultural values in Romania prioritize control and restraint over leisure time. Educationally, children are expected to perform well, and play is subordinated to studying (Conțiu, 2010). Therefore, Romanian parental and educational practices might be more restrictive and punitive, relying on negative consequences and punishment.

Thus, first it is important to pay attention to the pattern and rates of lying in different cultures, and after to apply for methods in order to promote children's honesty, as children can be more sensitive to one method than the other. It is important to specify that there is a specific social and cultural context in which lying is permitted or not permitted (the conventionality component). This component refers to the rules and social norms that govern our communication and is influenced by cultural factors. For example, most societies agree with lying to conceal transgression for personal purpose, while some societies encourage white lies, lies told for others, to make them feel better. So, individuals must determine the social context in which they decide to tell the truth or tell a lie.

One important factor that counts in using the method in which we ask children to "promise to tell the truth", reveals that in the motivation to lie they will take into account if they expect negative consequences or positive consequences for telling the truth. Studies which investigated the effect of moral stories showed that a negative character with bad consequences could facilitate children's sharing behavior (Yao and Enright, 2018), whereas moral stories focused on bad consequences failed to reduce lying in children (Lee *et al.*, 2014). Researchers are taking into account the possible differences between Chinese participants and Canadian participants, in the last study. Also, future studies should investigate if the results of the study made by Yao and Enright (2018) can be generalized to other cultures.

Regarding the method in which we increase children's self-awareness, literature shows that professional workers could use it with children's minor transgression of cheating, yet the influence of self-awareness on children's more serious transgression or different types of lies (e.g., prosocial lies) has not been tested (Bender *et al.*, 2018). We have no data regarding this method across culture.

In conclusion, future research should evaluate the long-term effects of these methods through longitudinal research. It would be also important to study lie-telling behavior in his natural environment, and methods effective for parents and teachers in their natural environment. A new direction is being proposed by Sauter *et al.*, (2019), indicating that future studies should evaluate the behavioural processes that could be responsible for the developmental patterns of lying. Children learn to lie in order to escape discipline and using negative reinforcement might not always be the best approach. More research is needed to examine the efficiency of methods by taking into account cultural differences.

Based on what we now know from literature, several programs of promoting honesty can be developed through the combination of methods discussed in this

paper, by teachers and parents. These methods could shape parental and educational practices meant to encourage honesty. The distinction between various methods to promote children's honesty, ranging from direct methods to more indirect methods is also useful for practitioners.

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REZUMAT

Minciuna la copii apare încă de la vârsta preșcolară și are ca și scop de a ascunde o faptă greșită, sau de a obține o recompensă. Din punctul de vedere al relațiilor sociale, acest comportament poate avea un impact negativ asupra relaționării. Prin urmare, este important ca profesioniștii care lucrează cu copii să promoveze dezvoltarea valorilor morale, punând accent important pe onestitate. În acest articol analizăm critic metodele importante și noi în promovarea onestității la copii. Metodele existente, precum încurajarea copiilor să spună adevărul, citirea de povești morale, sau îmbinarea poveștilor morale cu comportamente de împărtășire, precum și creșterea conștientizării de sine sunt metode care promovează comportamentul de onestitate, iar în același timp scad frecvența minciunii. De asemenea, în acest studiu teoretic subliniem și rolul culturii asupra minciunii. Sunt discutate direcții viitoare în promovarea onestității și implicațiile practice ale metodelor.