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# Are We Teaching Our Children to Lie?

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Just a few years ago, author Ralph Keyes argued that America had evolved “beyond honesty.” In *The Post-Truth Era: Honesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, Keyes proposed that honesty is now “on the ropes” as a virtue.

In presenting his case, Keyes related anecdotes and illustrations from contemporary life — most dealing with adults who have learned to lie and adults who have learned to expect lies. Now, Po Bronson of *New York* magazine has taken a look at the fate of honesty among America’s children and teenagers. In “[Learning to Lie](#),”

Bronson raises some issues many parents might otherwise ignore.

“In the last few years, a handful of intrepid scholars have decided it’s time to try to understand why kids lie,” Bronson reports. But, before looking too closely at *why* children lie, Bronson first established that kids *do* lie — and lie a lot.

Bronson described a test looking at whether teenagers lie to their parents on a range of 36 issues. As he reports:

*Out of the 36 topics, the average teen was lying to his parents about twelve of them. The teens lied about what they spent their allowances on, and whether they’d started dating, and what clothes they put on away from the house. They lied about what movie they went to, and whom they went with. They lied about alcohol and drug use, and they lied about whether they were hanging out with friends their parents disapproved of. They lied about how they spent their afternoons while their parents were at work. They lied about whether chaperones were in attendance at a party or whether they rode in cars driven by drunken teens.*

In the end, 98 percent of the teens admitted lying to parents. At the same time, 98 percent of the same teens said that lying is wrong. Add to this the fact that many of these kids admitted lying a great deal.

It turns out that children begin to lie very early. As a skill, lying seems tied to intelligence. The smarter kids lie earlier and more skillfully. Really smart kids can lie at 2 or 3.

As Bronson explains:

*Although we think of truthfulness as a young child’s paramount virtue, it turns out that lying 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,” [Victoria] Talwar has concluded.*

*This puts parents in the position of being either damned or blessed, depending on how they choose to look at it. If your 4-year-old is a good liar, it’s a strong sign she’s got brains. And it’s the smart, savvy kid who’s most at risk of becoming a habitual liar.*

Bronson pulls together some truly fascinating research, but he also asks a fascinating question — do parents inadvertently teach children to lie?

It turns out that parents often do just that. Not only do parents often teach children to lie, parents reinforce some lying as necessary for politeness and good personal relationships.

Consider this section of Bronson's article:

*The most disturbing reason children lie is that parents teach them to. According to Talwar, they learn it from us. "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 instruct him to swallow all his honest reactions and put on a polite smile. Talwar runs an experiment where children play 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. 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 why they like the bar of soap. Kids who shouted with glee when they won the Peeking Game suddenly mumble quietly and fidget.*

*Meanwhile, the child's parent usually cheers 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 remarks. She's regularly amazed at parents' seeming inability to recognize that white lies are still lies.*

*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 one per day, on average. The vast majority of these lies are white lies, lies to protect yourself or others, like telling the guy at work who brought in his wife's muffins that they taste great or saying, "Of course this is my natural hair color."*

*Encouraged to tell so many white lies and hearing so many others, children gradually get comfortable with being disingenuous. Insincerity becomes, literally, a daily occurrence. They learn that honesty only creates conflict, and 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 Pokémon cards?! I told you, you're not allowed to waste your allowance on Pokémon 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, many parents will recoil from this scenario — not because it is so implausible, but because they know it is true. Honesty can (and often does) produce conflict. For children, it can bring punishment when bad behavior is admitted. For parents, it can mean the necessity of confronting the child about disobedience. Thus, parents and children conspire to lower the risk of confrontation by accepting something other than the truth.

Bronson asserts that this often gets worse as the children get older. Adolescent children lie a great deal to their parents, and many parents are so confrontation-averse that they do not demand the truth. On the other hand, other parents shift into a more permissive mode, demanding the truth but not punishing rule-breaking. As Bronson explains: "Parents imagine a trade-off between being informed and being strict. Better to hear the truth and be able to help than be kept in the dark."

Christian parents should consider this analysis with care. Do we, along with other parents, effectively teach our children to lie? Have we traded off permissiveness for getting teenagers to tell the truth? Would we rather not know, if knowing means putting children and teens into situations in which they might lie?

The Christian worldview does not honor truth as a matter of mere politeness, but as a moral necessity. We deserve the truth from each other, and we owe the truth to each other. As Christian parents, we should ask ourselves whether we are teaching our children to lie — and whether we really expect our children and teens to tell us the truth.

Is honesty "on the ropes" at your house?

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