



The Truth About Kids' Lies

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Has your child ever looked you in the eye and told you she didn't eat the last cookie, even though her face was covered in crumbs? And when this happened, did you worry that your child had just taken her first step down a dangerous path of deceit? Well, you'll be happy to hear that lying is a normal part of development, according to an article in the January 2013 issue of *Today's Parent*, "The Littlest Liars" (available online: <http://www.todaysparent.com/healthy-kids-lie>).

The article quotes Kang Lee, a professor at the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto, who says that lying is part of typical preschool development, and that it "reflects that the child's cognitive ability has reached a new milestone" [1] — it means they have started to understand that they can use words to get their parents to think something that isn't actually true. Furthermore, the article points out that children are *encouraged* to lie in certain situations, such as when they receive a present they don't like ("Tell Grandma you like the sweater or she'll be upset!"). While only one third of three year olds lie, over 80% of four year olds lie [1]. The *Today's Parent* article goes on to explain that parents who catch their child in a lie can use the opportunity to explain what lying is, why it is wrong, and how the child might better handle that situation.

Learning to think about what other people think

The *Today's Parent* article touches on an important aspect of child development, that is, an understanding of others' thoughts and perspectives, also known as "Theory of Mind". We may not realize it, but we frequently think about others peoples' perspectives. For example, before we say or do something, we consider how this might affect the other person. If we think it would upset or offend that person, we (usually) decide to do something different. Or, we may say something we don't really mean like, "I'd love to come to the baby shower" even if we don't; we want the person to feel good about what they have proposed and so we adapt our behaviour to make sure they do.

So, how does lying begin? In order to tell a lie, a child must understand that what we say doesn't always correspond to what we are really thinking (as above), and that sometimes people hide what they really think and feel [2]. This ability to understand "hidden feelings" also enables children to understand jokes, teasing, and sarcasm [2]. It's not surprising to hear that while one third of three year olds lie, over 80% of four year olds lie, because a child's theory of mind and ability to understand the perspectives of others develops significantly between ages three and four [3].

The development of a child's theory of mind is important for his social skills and the development of relationships. Research has shown that children with a more highly developed theory of mind are better communicators, resolve conflicts more easily, have more complex pretend play, are rated as more socially competent by their teachers, are happier in school, and more popular with peers [3]. Theory of mind is an area of difficulty for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Because tuning in to others' thoughts and perspectives is challenging for this group of children, lying usually doesn't come as naturally to them as it does in children with typical development.

Promoting a child's ability to take other people's perspectives

There are simple ways to promote children's theory of mind during everyday activities. Hearing their caregivers talk about what's going on in other peoples' minds helps children tune in to others' thoughts and feelings.

The following ideas come from the Hanen TalkAbility™ Program [2]:

Discuss people's likes, dislikes, thoughts, feelings, and opinions

Use words like "want", "like", "hope", "think", "know", "feel" and "wonder" when you have conversations with your child. This exposes your child to the words we use to talk about others' thoughts and feelings.

For example, at dinner time, you can talk about people's likes and dislikes to help your child understand that everyone has a different perspective: "I *like* pepperoni on my pizza, but you *like* cheese". Or if you hear a loud noise outside, you can talk about what you think caused the noise: "I *think* that was a garbage truck emptying the garbage can. What do you *think* made that noise?" You can talk about your own thoughts and feelings: "I *wonder* if I should bring a sweater – it might be cold later". You can also talk about others' feelings: "Sarah looks upset – I *think* she hurt her foot when she fell".

Take on different roles during pretend play

By pretending to be someone else, a child has to see the world from that person's perspective. This helps him understand that different people have different points of view.

Read stories that involve hidden feelings, different points of view, unexpected reactions, and problems

Helping your child think about different characters' points of view will teach him to tune in to people's thoughts and feelings. For example, during *Good Night, Gorilla* [4], you can talk about how the zookeeper doesn't know that all of

the animals are following him home. Or while reading *The Emperor's New Clothes*, you can talk about how the Emperor thinks he is wearing new clothes but that he really isn't, or discuss why the Emperor's subjects lie to him and tell him that they like his new clothes.

So, the next time your preschooler fibs, don't worry about his morality. Rather, view it as an opportunity for discussion, as well as sign that your child is developing social understanding and theory of mind.

Much of the information about theory of mind in this article comes from [TalkAbility](#) (Sussman, 2006), a guidebook for helping verbal children on the Autism spectrum develop social skills and theory of mind.

References

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2. Sussman, F. (2006). *TalkAbility: People Skills for verbal children on the autism spectrum – A guide for parents*. Toronto: The Hanen Centre.
3. Astington, J. W. & Edward, M. J. (2010). The development of theory of mind in early childhood. In: Tremblay, R. E., Barr, R. G., Peters, R. DeV. & Boivin, M., eds. *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development; 2010:1-6. Available at: <http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/documents/Astington-EdwardANGxp.pdf>.
4. Rathmann, P. (1994). *Good Night, Gorilla*. G.P. Putnam's Sons: New York.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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