

LINE ON LIFE

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The Normal Lie *

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Most of us know the commandment, "*Thou shalt not bear false witness.*" If we are truthful with ourselves, we know that we have all lied at times – and we may still lie. ("*That was a good supper, honey. I just ate so little, because I had a big lunch.*") Is lying normal?

Arnold Goldberg, a psychiatrist from Rush Medical College in Chicago, sees a normal aspect to lying.

"Lying is as much a part of normal growth and development as telling the truth.

The ability to lie is a human achievement, one of those abilities that tends to set them apart from all other species."

In terms of the psychoanalytic theory of the self – if the child's first lie is successful – it marks the first experience that the parents are not "*all-knowing.*" This realization usually happens in the second year of life. It is crucial to children's view of themselves as separate persons with their own wills. They discover that they "*can get away with things.*" It is the beginning of the end of idealizing parents. Goldberg adds, "*The first time you see a limit to your parents' powers is a developmental step forward, towards a more realistic view of others.*"

One study was done with three-year-olds, setting an attractive toy behind their back, but asking them not to look at it while the experimenter leaves the room. Essentially, children lie for the same reason that adults do – to avoid punishment, to get what they want and to make excuses for themselves. Adults typically use "*white lies,*" like the example at the beginning of the article. White lies are seen as the social lubricant to soothe feelings of others.

In contrast, pre-teenagers commonly use the "*boast.*" To win approval and admiration of their peers, preteens invent or embellish their deeds. They frequently boast that they are able to ski or speak a foreign language, when it is actually not true. According to Goldberg –

"Children at that age are fine-tuning their superego or conscience. The first evidence of pathological lying shows up during these years, in children who have a faulty superego and think they can get away with anything."

In their early teens, children tend to be as capable as adults in their lying. Adolescents test the limits. They try to see what they can get away with – and lying is part of this. Even with the problems of assessing lying, studies of reports of teachers and parents indicate frequent lying in one of six children. However, as adults, one in four people admit to lying frequently as children.

"About 10 percent don't peek while we're gone. Of the rest, a third will admit they peeked, a third will lie and say they did not peek and a third will refuse to say."

"Those who won't answer represent a transition group, who are in the process of learning how to lie, but don't do it well yet. They are visibly the most nervous. Those who say they did not look – who lie – looked the most relaxed. They learned to lie well. There seems to be a certain relief in knowing how to lie effectively."

Only about 3% of children lie so frequently that it is considered a problem. If lying is so persistent that it is destructive to the life of the liars – or those to whom they lie – it is a problem. Of course, children who frequently get into trouble are those who lie the most. In psychological studies, being chronic liars is linked to more serious trouble as the children grow older. A study was done with 466 men in Massachusetts who were labeled as "liars" in grade school. By their early twenties, they were more likely than other boys to have been convicted of felonies.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to tell if lying is a cause or a symptom of the problem. In a study of 300 boys, the chronic liars tended to come from families where they were poorly supervised or felt rejected by their parents.

"Happily married mothers supervised their boys more than did mothers who were not happy in their marriages or were single. It is easy to imagine that parents under pressure have less time and inclination to keep an eye on their children. And when there is less supervision, lying is less risky."

However – if we want others to trust our word – we need to tell the truth. Once a lie has been discovered, it is hard – if not impossible – to regain the trust that is lost.

**Although some lies may be helpful in the short run,
they typically lead to problems in the long run.**

In addition, "white lies" can also have negative effects. Many of us fear being rejected or hurting the feelings of others. However, if you *always* praise what another does, that person will value the praise less and/or be very unlikely to change. For example, take the

little lie we stated at the beginning of this article. If you never indicate your dissatisfaction with the meals, do you think the food will ever get better?

* Adapted from Daniel Coleman's "Lies Can Point to Mental Disorders or Signal Normal Growth," *The New York Times*, May 17, 1988.