

PSYCHOLOGY

Why Children Tell Lies

A Child Does Not Tell Falsehoods Without a Good Reason Which Is Sometimes the Example Set by His Parents

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

THE FAMOUS story of how the small George Washington confessed bravely to his misdeed of cutting down the cherry tree because he "could not tell a lie" is in all probability itself a big whopper.

But it has been told and retold to succeeding generations of young Georges, and after all it is true in the sense that it shows the spirit of responsibility which the Father of Our Country did have. It is the spirit which all parents want to see their sons develop.

As to whether the repetition of such a tale, however plain its moral, encourages the modern George to speak the truth, psychologists have strong doubts. Your child can be brought up to be as truthful as history and folk-tale report the great Washington to have been, but mere urging or preaching will not do it.

Some pessimistic parents and teachers have held the belief that honesty cannot be taught at all, that every child is born either honest or dishonest. Some even go so far as to hold with the Psalmist that "all men are liars."

But recent investigations by psychologists indicate that it is not Nature who is responsible for the lies of children. Rather, lying is an outgrowth of a particular situation and the surroundings or background of the child.

In an exhaustive study of the lies of children conducted for the Character Education Inquiry in cooperation with the Institute of Social and Religious Research, Drs. Hugh Hartshorne and Mark A. May of Yale, found that a child will lie in one situation and will tell the truth in another. He will cheat with one teacher and be honest with another.

No one, these scientists say, is either honest or dishonest by "nature." There is no such thing as a born liar. If the child lies it is because he has been placed in a situation where a lie seems to him the only way out, or where he is actually rewarded for deception, or perhaps he has never learned the difference between the truth and untruth. Or

possibly he sees the elders he admires practicing the deception they deplore.

If your child should tell a lie, then, don't worry about his character. But rather look into the situation that called forth the lie and see what can be done to change it.

To aid you in this, Dr. Maurice H. Krout of the Crane Jr. College, Chicago, has made a careful analysis of children's lies and what lies behind them.

An old "gag" says that there are three kinds of lies—white lies, lies, and statistics. Dr. Krout also found three kinds of children's lies, only one type of which consists of deliberate deception.

Child Misinterprets Events

The first class is due to a misunderstanding, or misapprehension, of what happens to the child or what is said to him. It is very difficult, if not quite impossible, for an adult to realize how limited is the experience of the young child. If the two-year-old tells you that his older brother has eaten his ball, it may seem to you that he is lying perhaps for the purpose of getting the older child into trouble. But don't be too hasty. It may be that the baby has seen the boy eating an apple. The apple to him is, like all round objects, a ball.

Dr. Krout also tells the story of a little boy who was taken on his first train trip. On his return, he bragged to his playmates of having been through a country where the people were no bigger than toys. This seemed, of course, like a terrible whopper. But actually the train had passed along a mountain slope where the child could look down on people in the valley far below. To adults on the train, these people were merely ordinary folks seen from a great distance. But to the child with no knowledge of the effect of distance, they were tiny Lilliputians.

Lack of understanding of the meaning of words is another cause of the untruths which fall in this same class. Children are handicapped not only by having an insufficient number and variety of words with which to express themselves but by having only a vague

notion of what many words really mean.

Grammar presents another difficulty. Tense may mean nothing to the small child, yet "I did go to the store" may seem to the misunderstanding adult punishable as a lie, whereas "I will go to the store," or "I meant to go" is the truth and possibly what the child was trying to express.

As an example of the extent to which adult words may be misunderstood by children, Dr. Krout told of what happened when children in an English grammar-school were asked to write out the Lord's prayer. One youngster wrote part of the prayer as "Harold be thy name," and another "Lead us not into Thames station."

The second class of children's lies contains those due to a confusion of the fancied with the real. The child may remember and relate his dreams as though they were actual events. This type of untruth, Dr. Krout calls a prevarication.

Such prevarication is innocent on the part of the child, and may be entirely unconscious. Sometimes, however, it may look suspicious to the elders especially when the child adds to true facts bits of his wishes or day dreams.

A little three-year-old girl told a story of having been walking with her father the day before. She said a dog attacked her father, but that she had hit the dog with a stick and saved her father. Actually they had taken the walk and met the dog, but the rest of the story was made up. What Dr. Krout believes happened was that when they met the dog, the little girl imagined or wished herself taking a heroic part in an adventure.

Fancy Recalled as Fact

The next day the wish and the reality had become one event to the child and were remembered together as an actual event.

There is an inconsistency in the parent who punishes a child for such prevarication and yet encourages her to play store with checkers for money, or to feed imaginary tea to her dolls, or to ride "horseyback" on a broom.

Children must be taught patiently the difference between wishes and fancies

and "cold facts." But such confusions are not immoral, they are the natural accompaniments of immaturity and childish ignorance.

The third type of children's lies includes only conscious substitutions of the untrue for the true. These are called by Dr. Krout deceptions.

Why do children resort to deliberate deception?

The first reason is fear. If the child early discovers that just one little lie will save him from the wrath of a stern parent, who can blame him if he takes this same means to avert the storm on another occasion?

If the trainer wants to teach a puppy to do a trick, all he has to do is to present a piece of meat each time the trick is done correctly and scold or slap for each failure. The puppy knows nothing of whether the trick he learns is right or wrong.

In this respect, the young human is very much like the young dog. If the child is punished when he fails to lie and rewarded when the lie is convincing, he will, if bright, soon be learning bigger and better lies.

Another reason for deception is to overcome opposition or to gain an end without the friction so often caused by requests or demands.

The desire for attention is a powerful reason for telling the amazing whoppers that some children delight in. An anecdote which the great scientist Charles Darwin told of his own boyhood shows that he was one of these boys. In his story, rather the reverse of the cherry tree story, he said:

"I once gathered much valuable fruit from my father's trees and hid it in the shrubbery, and then ran in breathless haste, to spread the news that I had discovered a hoard of stolen fruit."

It is very likely that the same motive which caused him in his childhood to tell stories of this sort was the force which later directed his scientific labors.

A similar reason for deception is the desire to save face. The preservation of self-respect and the respect of associates is almost as necessary to the human, young and old, as is the preservation of life itself.

All children have a more or less powerful tendency to brag of what "My Daddy" has or does. If the youngster is so unfortunate as to be disappointed in his parents, the natural compensation is to amaze his associates with totally fictitious tales.

The child will also lie to avoid that



NO TIME FOR FIBBING

Modern educators plan school work so that there is little opportunity or need for lying and cheating, but lots of useful scope for the child's imagination

horror of youth—ridicule. Dr. Krout tells of a little girl who went to the store for a loaf of bread but when she got there had forgotten what she went for. Rather than confess to this and suffer the ridicule of the family she lied and said that the store was "sold out."

The part of the adult in the child's lie is nearly always greater than he realizes. It is for this reason that the adult can train the child so that he will not deceive.

Here are a few practical suggestions for the aid of the parent or teacher based on the findings of the Character Education Inquiry.

Preaching Fails

In the first place give up urging the child to be honest and tell the truth. Give up, too, general discussions of ideals. Not that children should not learn ideals and standards of conduct, but preaching is not the way to teach young children.

What the youngster should be told is just what is honest and what is dishonest in terms of definite situations. This is to say that the modern child trainer would not say, "Johnny, you mustn't tell stories to your teacher," but rather "Johnny, you shouldn't tell me that you lost your arithmetic paper when you really never worked the problem, because that deceives me. If I had known that you had trouble with your problems, I could have helped you. As it was I thought you had been careless."

The need for deceit should be eliminated. Owning up should not result in discouraging punishments. Attention should be given the child without any need for tall tales or false bragging.

But most important of all, a most meticulous example of honesty should

be set the child. For after all the question of what is a lie and what is not is hard enough for the child to learn without complicating the matter by requiring him to distinguish between a polite, or white lie, and a "bad" one.

The following questions form a "psychological test" which may aid in telling you whether your boy is being brought up to emulate the George of the cherry tree:

1. Is the boy ever instructed to tell Mrs. Brown that the adult hiding in the kitchen is "not at home"?
2. Does he ever hear big sister tell the old boy friend that she has a headache and later see her go out with the new one?
3. Does he ever hear the grownups laugh over the way Billy fooled the traffic cop to avoid getting a ticket?
4. Does anyone ever make promises to him which are not kept?
5. Does anyone threaten him with extreme punishments such as cutting off ears or tongue or even killing, which of course there is no intention of keeping?
6. Has he been told extravagant tales of a "bogie" man or "bears that will come out of the woods to eat you"?
7. Has he ever seen anyone wear or use an article and then return it to the store as new?
8. Has he ever had the unpleasant shock of tasting bitter medicine after being told that it would taste like lemonade?
9. Does he hear his father tell of the size of "that big one that got away"?
10. Has he ever had the heartbreaking experience of waking in the night to find that his parents have gone out although they told him they would not leave him?