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## The Science of Lying



A study released on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022 discusses how children learn about lying and truth-telling shows that parents and other caregivers tend to give mixed messages on the subject. The Texas State University research, conducted by Laure Brimbal and A.M. Crossman, indicates that children are socialized to not tell the truth in every situation.

"Children ... develop the ability to tell lies from an early age. Learning to tell lies is a normal part of children's social development," Brimbal said.

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"Children are learning about honesty in a quite complicated environment. It appears to be an important social skill to lie to fit in with other's expectations, ... despite ... conflicting messages from their adult caregivers that it is wrong to lie ... whilst in addition, it sometimes is perceived as unkind to be honest."

The study differentiated between antisocial and prosocial lying. The former, which is deemed morally unacceptable, is self-serving, self-protective, or aimed at gaining a reward or benefit for oneself. The latter (sometimes called "white lies" or "altruistic lying") is meant to protect or benefit others, to strengthen relationships or nurture positive interpersonal interactions, and is considered socially acceptable.

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Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "white lies" as "lies about small or unimportant matters that someone tells to avoid hurting another person."

"A white lie," says Dr. Julia Breur, a licensed marriage and family therapist, "is a well-intentioned untruth ... to spare someone's feelings and to do no harm."

Dennis Manning, a student, explained how he thinks about what constitutes a "white lie": "The standard is, if the truth hurts and serves no purpose to the greater good by being revealed, and the lie hurts no one, it is considered a white lie. Telling Aunt Ethel her pies don't last long at your house because of her stellar pie-making skills makes her happy. To tell her you throw her pies in the trash because they are inedible might hurt her feelings." Same truth, but different ways of communicating it. Different results.

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According to Brimbal and Crossman, "parents could be socializing their children to rephrase harsh truths or to outright lie to be polite or protect someone." They point to the oft-repeated instruction parents give to children who speak a little too honestly, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all."

Jason Anthony, a commentator, says "White lies are often used as 'social grease' to foster communication or to avoid awkwardness or to simply be polite. Being diplomatic sometimes requires us to say things we really don't mean or to behave in ways that are scripted and not really genuine."

On balance, the researchers found that the adult participants in the study viewed lying more negatively than truth-telling, and subtlety more positively than bluntness. Children who made subtle statements (whether true or false) were viewed more positively than those making blunt statements (whether true or false).

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How the adult participants viewed the children depended in part on what they thought motivated them, if they told a lie. The adults tended to reward children who appeared to lie to be polite or to protect someone, while punishing those who told blunt truths. Subtle truth-tellers were rewarded most for their behavior.

Brimbal and Crossman discovered that as children age, they learn to consider the context when deciding when and how to tell the truth or a falsehood.

"Although liars are typically judged negatively, individuals differentiate lie acceptability as a function of contextual factors, such as who is lying to whom, with what benefit, and why," they explain. Adults socialize children to evaluate whether in a particular situation it is better to lie politely, tell the truth bluntly, or tell the truth subtly.

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From The Wright Foundation for the Realization of Human Potential comes this advice: "Now there might not be a kind way to answer, 'Do these pants make my butt look bad?' But most pals would appreciate knowing the truth from us before they walk out the door. There are nicer ways that we could say it, like, 'I think those blue pants are more flattering on you.' In choosing a gentler approach, we're not telling a white lie but rather sticking to the truth in a less hurtful way. The results and the message are still the same, and our friend will appreciate our candor."

Tish Tanner, who describes herself as a stay-home mom and homemaker, wrote, "I will tell a white lie rather than a mean truth."

Wendy Rose Gould, of Business Insider, suggests we should deliver honesty "with a side of gentleness." **END.**



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## **Warming Up:**

Is “honesty the best policy” in every situation? Should people be “brutally honest”? Why or why not?

Why do you think people lie?

Are the reasons behind “white lies” and outright lies different or similar?

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## **Read Proverbs 12:17-22**

One of the Ten Commandments forbids "bearing false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). This passage in Proverbs indicates how seriously God views lying ("Lying lips are an abomination to the LORD"). At the same time, "rash words" such as might be spoken by someone who tells "the brutal truth," have the power to wound and even to kill, while wiser words have the power to heal.

### **Questions:**

What social norms exist around truth telling? When is it recommended? Discouraged?

Are there different rules about telling the truth in different situations in our culture?



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## **Read 1 Kings 22:5-36**

In this story, Ahab, the king of Israel inquires of Jehosephat, the king of Judah, if they should together fight against the king of Judah. They then inquire of their prophets, who are tempted to not tell the truth.

### **Questions:**

When do people desire to hear something other than the truth when it comes to God's Word?

What happens when we decide to reject a message before we have heard it?

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## Read Luke 20:1-8

Jesus refuses to continue a conversation with some people, knowing that a true conversation requires truth on the part of all participants.

### Question:

Can you think of a time when you cut a conversation short or even avoided a conversation because you knew the other person did not want to hear the truth?

Have you ever avoided a conversation yourself because you did not want to hear the truth?

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**Read Ephesians 4:15-32**

Paul brings a message to the Ephesians about speaking truth and love both.

**Question:**

What is difficult for us about “speaking the truth in love”?

Why are we sometimes afraid to speak the truth? Why are we sometimes neglectful in showing love while speaking truth?



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## Wrapping It Up

Are there situations that are notoriously or regularly plagued by “mistruths” and lies that Christians can especially set themselves apart in by speaking the truth in love?

How does Scripture help us when it comes to the difficult problem of telling the truth?