

Chopping the Cherry Tree: How Kids Learn Honesty

April 30, 2014

Back in the 90s, in the midst of the so-called culture wars, Republican moralist William Bennett published a hefty collection of stories and fables and poems called the *Book of Virtues*. The bestselling volume extolled timeless values like courage and compassion and honesty. At the same time, Herbert Kohl and Colin Greer authored an anthology called *A Call To Character*, which also used stories to promote a somewhat different set of timeless values. The dueling miscellanies represented a fundamental and acrimonious division over how to raise and instruct the next generation of American citizens.

The differences between the two volumes of moral instruction weren't even that subtle, if one was familiar with the vocabulary of America's culture war. Both agreed on qualities of character like kindness and responsibility. But is unwavering patriotism more desirable than moral reasoning? Does discretion trump courage, or the other way around?

This debate didn't begin in the 90s, of course, nor did the idea of teaching values with stories. But lost in the moral bickering was a much more basic question: Does such instruction work? Can we really transmit a moral code to our children through the use of stories?

A team of psychological scientists has begun to explore that important question empirically. Headed by the University of Toronto's Kang Lee, the scientists started with a widely embraced virtue—honesty. They wanted to know if morality tales instruct young children not only in an abstract way, but actually shape their behavior.

Kids lie. This is well known from much previous research. Children begin to lie as young as age 2, usually to conceal other transgressions, and they become increasingly sophisticated liars as they get older. By late childhood it is almost impossible for adults to tell if a kid is lying or telling the truth.

So Lee and colleagues did not hope to turn normal kids into saints. But they did want to see if exposing them to classic stories about lying and truth telling would moderate their behavior. They chose three well known tales for study: *Pinocchio*, *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, and the apocryphal *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*. For those who have forgotten, all three of these moral tales try to promote honesty—but in very different ways. *Pinocchio* shows the immediate and dramatic negative consequences of lying—a growing, incriminating nose. In *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, lying has dire but delayed consequences: The little shepherd boy lies so much about a wolf that nobody believes him when a sound a true alarm—and he dies. The familiar George Washington story, by contrast, emphasizes the positive consequences of honesty. Young George tells his father the truth and is rewarded with praise.

The scientists predicted that all three of these stories would be effective in promoting honesty in kids. They designed an elaborate experiment in which 3- to 7-year-olds were given a fairly irresistible opportunity to cheat in a game, and then were asked whether or not they had cheated. But before the

honesty test, each of the kids heard a reading of one of the three stories. Others, the controls, heard *The Hare and the Tortoise*, which does not deal with honesty or lying. The idea was to see if just this brief, but engaging exposure to moral instruction tempered kids' natural deceptiveness—and if any of the three stories was more effective than the others.

The results were intriguing—and unexpected. As reported in an article to appear in the journal *Psychological Science*, both *Pinocchio* and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* failed to moderate the kids' tendency to lie about their own transgressions. Only *George Washington and the Cherry Tree* significantly increased the likelihood that the cheating kids would tell on themselves—and this effect was found regardless of age.

So why would these classic tales of lying and consequences not do their job? Well, the scientists suspected that it might be the nature of the consequences. Both *Pinocchio* and the shepherd boy experience very negative consequences as a result of their dishonesty—public humiliation in one case, a violent death in the other. Young George's story, by contrast, emphasizes the virtue of honesty and sends the message that truth telling leads to positive consequences. Lee and colleagues ran another experiment to test this explanation.

It was really just a slight variation on the first experiment. All they did in this version was change the ending of the George Washington story to make it negative. The story no longer extolled honesty as a positive virtue, but instead punished dishonesty—just like the other two tales. And the results supported the explanation: The kids who heard a tale of negative George got no benefit from the exercise. They remained as dishonest as all the other kids in the study.

The culture wars of the 90s are hardly over. Indeed, the country is more polarized than ever over basic values, with those who were harsh and punitive becoming increasingly so today. Evidence shows that parents actually favor punishing deception rather than rewarding truthfulness. These results taken together suggest the opposite—that emphasizing the positive value of honesty is more effective than accentuating the negative.

Follow Wray Herbert's reporting on psychological science in The Huffington Post and on Twitter at @wrayherbert.