Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

More teaching resources from the Observer: Wearable Cognitive Assistants


In the 1997 film *Liar Liar*, Fletcher Reede routinely lies to his young son. Then, when his son makes a birthday wish for him to stop lying, Fletcher is flung into 24 hours of total honesty. What follows is a fantastical exploration of Fletcher’s reliance on deception in his life and the cost of these lies to his family.

Most parents likely don’t lie to the degree that Fletcher does, but research indicates that most parents do
lie to their children, despite espousing honesty as an important virtue. Setoh et al. (2023) present a theoretical model for understanding a specific practice called “parenting by lying,” a relatively new area of research that involves parents lying to influence their children’s behavior, attitudes, or beliefs.

Some parents issue false threats to increase behavioral compliance (e.g., “If you don’t finish your milk, your bones will dissolve”). Other parental lies are designed to influence children’s feelings or beliefs (e.g., lying about Santa Claus to create a magical holiday).

Although evidence suggests that most parents lie to their children, only a small fraction (5%) of adult grown children report that their parents lied to them often. Being able to accurately report parental lies relies on children detecting the lies. Early adolescence is a time when children’s sense of being deceived matches parental reports of lying. Parenting by lying is a global phenomenon, with Asian and Turkish samples reporting the practice to a high degree (over 95% experienced parenting by lying). European American samples tended to report lower rates, though still relatively high (~75%).

In other close relationships, deception can harm intimacy and erode trust. Is this the case with parent–child relationships? Scholars suggest that the answer is yes. Parenting by lying can erode parent–child attachment bonds, create mistrust, and model lying as an acceptable behavior to children according to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). Indeed, individuals who recall their parents lying to them during childhood are likely in adulthood to lie to their parents, research suggests.

The Parenting by Lying Integrative Model suggested by the authors offers new directions for research and provides a framework for asking questions about motives. As seen in Liar Liar, the truth can hurt and be jarring to receive. Comforting lies that influence positive self-talk and growth behaviors may improve well-being with less potential risk to the parent–child dynamic. Future research may show such lies to be causally different than parental lying that focuses on maintaining authority and behavioral compliance. Scientists should also examine how parenting by lying affects children of varying temperaments, personalities, and histories.

Student Activities

To bring this cutting-edge research into the classroom, choose one of the following activities.

1. Setoh et al. (2023) describe parenting by lying as a research area in its infancy. This presents a wonderful opportunity to practice writing research questions and designing studies to test them. The authors specifically call for diversification of data collection methods and study designs. Have students work together in small groups to complete the following table on variables related to parenting by lying:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Research question</th>
<th>Describe Method</th>
<th>Describe Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motives to lie</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parenting styles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mundane lies vs. serious</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Parental justification for lying
Interventions to reduce parenting by lying

2. Discussion prompt: Parents may justify lies they tell their children as being for the “greater good.” Parenting by lying involves deception to influence behavior, attitudes, or beliefs. Have students generate and discuss categories of lies that would fall under the parenting-as-lying umbrella. Just as institutional review boards make determinations of risk to participants and broader benefits of the knowledge gained in psychological science, ask students to discuss the potential benefits and risks of each category of parental lies, providing examples generated through their discussions. This topic can give way to a broader discussion of deceiving psychological study participants “for the greater good.”

3. Discussion prompt: Have students read and discuss “There are better ways to talk with your kids about Santa,” written by developmental psychologists Candice Mills and Thalia R. Goldstein and published in The New York Times. Some students will come to the conversation having experienced parental lies about Santa in their childhood. Other students may not have experienced this at all or will have quickly learned the truth about Santa. The Times piece is based on developmental psychology research that looks at the Santa deception from both the parent and child perspectives. Mills and Goldstein offer evidence-informed advice on transitioning children to disbelief and respecting children’s growing autonomy and critical thinking skills. It is likely to bring a lively discussion of students’ experiences on beloved holiday traditions and the idea of collective deception.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or login to comment.

References


