Chapter 5

Children as Liars and Targets of Lies

It's a good thing kids are such good problem solvers. Otherwise, they might really be confused by adult messages concerning lying and deception. Early on, children are told loud and clear: "Do not lie. Lying is wrong. You will be punished if you lie." The observant child soon realizes that grown-ups sometimes engage in the very thing they are forbidding children to do. "Are adults really lying or is it something different?" they may wonder. "And if they are lying, why can't I lie?" Children who observe adults lying are more likely to lie themselves (Hays & Carver, 2014). Adding to the confusion, the child soon realizes that he or she can be punished for telling the truth as well as for lying. Nevertheless, most kids eventually figure it all out. They learn the importance of telling the truth and the necessity of having a moral compass. But they also learn that some lies are perceived as worse than others and the ability to lie in certain situations can be a valuable part of their budding social competence (Feldman, Tomasian, & Coats, 1999). Few become chronic liars (Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986). How does all this come about? In order to find out, let's begin by examining the development of the cognitive and behavioral skills which are employed during intentionally deceptive acts.

> **"One must have felt a real desire to exchange thoughts with others in order to discover all that a lie can involve."**
>
> *— J. Piaget*

> **"The skills which make deception possible seem also responsible for developing the more positive social skills such as empathy and compassion."**
>
> *— M. Vasek*

Childhood Lying: Plotting its Growth

In order to engage in the kind of behavior adults would call lies, children have to develop or master skills in five areas (Lee, 2013; Vasek, 1986).

Perspective-Taking and "Theory of Mind"

People have different needs, beliefs, attitudes, interests, and priorities. As obvious as this may seem to us as adults, we were not born knowing it. A cornerstone of Swiss developmental psychologist

"My 9-year old is just figuring out about lying and that's a tough thing. It's hard to roll that one back. Because lying is pretty amazingly useful in life. How do you tell a kid not to use a thing that just solves every possible problem like magic?"

— Louis C.K.

Jean Piaget's (1954) theory of cognitive development is the idea that human infants are profoundly "egocentric"—that is, unable to comprehend that someone else may have a different mental experience from their own and consequently unable to take another person's perspective. As young children develop, they not only learn that other perspectives exist, but also how to take those perspectives and use them. Children who can recognize that other people have their own minds and can thus have other perspectives are said to have developed a "theory of mind" (McHugh & Stewart, 2012). In a typical developing child, a coherent theory of mind emerges between ages 3 and 5 (although rudiments of this skill, such as following another person's gaze to understand what he or she is looking at, appear earlier). Failure to acquire a theory of mind and perspective-taking skills are the hallmark symptoms of autism, a psychological disorder that usually appears early in life (Kormaz, 2011).

Some scholars argue that a true understanding of theory of mind is unique to the human species (e.g., Penn & Povinelli, 2007). But even for adult humans, perspective-taking can be challenging. Accurate perspective-taking is hindered by the "other minds problem," which occurs because we can never know from a first-person perspective exactly how things are perceived by another person with another mind. Perspective-taking has important social implications. In both children and adults, it is often associated with greater empathy, prosocial behavior, and more favorable treatment of the person (or group) whose perspective is taken. Research consistently demonstrates that instructing people to take the perspective of another person in need leads to increased feelings of compassion and often results in offers to help the person whose perspective was taken (Malle & Hodges, 2005; Vasek, 1986). However, taking the perspective of another is also essential for someone to engage in deception. Ceci, Leichtman, and Putnick (1992) explain it this way:

> *For children to engage in full-blown deception they must be able to read the listener's mind. And to read another's mind, they must be able to do two things at once. First, they must be able to conjure up an alternative reality that they can temporarily substitute for the reality they know to be authentic. (For example, they can appreciate that a sponge looks like a rock to someone viewing it from another angle.) Second, they must be able to set aside their own beliefs in the unreality of the alternative state (e.g., that it is a rock), and assume the perspective of the individual who believes this to be a reality. In short, they must be able to substitute*

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belief for disbelief, in accepting the stance of the other. This is also necessary for children to appreciate that their own prior mental states were false (e.g., realizing that at one time they also thought that the sponge was a rock). (p. ix)

Through perspective-taking, a liar determines that the target of a lie does not have certain information that he or she has. Perspective-taking enables liars to understand the idea of a false belief held by the target. Knowledge gained through perspective-taking is also invaluable to deceivers in determining what messages are likely to create that false belief. Some lies can become terribly complex and the liar's ability to anticipate the target's behavior is the difference between a successful and a failed lie. For example, suppose you say you were at Wanda's house and you weren't. What does the target know about Wanda? What will you say if you're asked about something you should have seen at Wanda's house? Will the target talk to Wanda?

Executive Functions

Executive functions are higher-order cognitive skills that emerge in late infancy and develop during childhood. Three of these functions—inhibitory control, working memory, and planning—are critical to deception development. Inhibitory control is the ability to suppress interfering thoughts or actions (Carlson, Moses, & Breton, 2002). To successfully mislead someone, children must not only utter false information that differs from reality but also conceal the true information it contradicts. To maintain the lie, they must inhibit thoughts and statements contrary to the lie and remember the contents of the lie, at least in the short-term. They use "working memory," a system for temporarily holding and processing information, for this purpose. Maintaining a lie also requires planning, in that liars must prepare the contents of a lie prior to uttering it in order to appear to convincing to their audience. Carlson, Moses, and Hix (1998) found that preschool children who experience difficulty with learning tasks that require a high level of inhibitory control, working memory, and planning also have difficulty with deception tasks. Clemens et al. (2010) argue that individual differences in deceptive skill are strongly related to one's ability to regulate behavior and handle the increase in cognitive load a lie creates. Thus, children's maturing executive functions seem to facilitate their successful lie-telling.

Understanding Intentionality

Lies are designed to deliberately mislead others. They are not just "mistakes." Therefore, a liar understands that his or her own behavior is intentionally designed to make the target perceive it as truthful. It is not just intentional behavior, but intentionally misleading behavior which requires perspective-taking. Acknowledging intention means acknowledging one's desire to effect certain changes in another person and the attendant responsibilities associated with those intentions. Liars must also understand that the target of their deception also may have intentions—to deceive and to detect deception.

Understanding Social Norms

Successful liars must also be aware of the specific social-cultural contexts in which lying is prohibited or permissible. For example, most societies eschew lying to conceal transgressions for personal gain, but condone "white lies" designed to spare the feelings of the person lied to. Most children over 3 understand that lying to conceal a transgression is inappropriate and they should tell the truth instead (Lyon & Dorado, 2008). However, their knowledge of this social norm doesn't strictly dictate their actual behavior. Children often report believing that lying is morally wrong, but lie anyway. In contrast, their knowledge of norms about promises does seem to affect their decisions to lie or not. Children asked to promise to tell the truth about a transgression are less likely to lie than others who are not (Evans & Lee, 2010). But they are more likely to lie in situations in which social norms direct them to refrain from being completely honest (Talwar & Lee, 2008). When deciding whether to a lie or not, children must determine the social context in which the truth or a lie is called for, as well as the specific social norm that motivates it. Failure to discriminate appropriately could lead to negative consequences.

Communication Skills

The ability to engage in the preceding cognitions associated with perspective-taking, intentionality, and social norms must work in concert with certain communication behavior in order for the deceiver to effectively lie.

One communication skill deceivers must have is a verbal repertoire from which language choices and persuasive strategies can be implemented as needed. Strategies and language choices are based on anticipated needs as well as information obtained from monitoring reactions of the target.

Deceivers also need the ability to effectively manage their own behavior—to mask or hide their true feelings and to avoid enacting any behavior that might make the target suspicious that "something just doesn't seem right"—e.g., too little or too much eye gaze, speech that is too hesitant or too rapid, too many nervous mannerisms or too little movement, or too much vocal uncertainty. Effective deceivers not only have to avoid showing some behaviors, they have to enact others. And some of these behaviors will be effective at one age and not another. A pleasant smile on a very young child, for example, may be a very effective cover for deceptive behavior, but the same behavior shown by an adult may arouse suspicion of deception.

The growing child gradually acquires each of these cognitive and behavioral skills and learns how to coordinate them for maximum effectiveness. *These are the basic skills necessary to effectively deceive others, but they are also skills which are fundamental to social competence*. A person with greater social competence is also likely to be the better liar (Feldman, Tomasian, & Coats, 1999; Lee, 2013). It is not possible to establish the exact age when children acquire certain skills because learning environments and genetic pre-wiring may vary from child to child. Nevertheless, the general developmental pattern is as follows:

Age 2–3

Observations of "deceit-like" behavior are rare prior to age two, but the following accounts of play behavior by 19 month old children have been noted. Chevalier-Skolnikoff (1986) recorded the behavior of a child who repeatedly offered his mother a toy and then laughed as he pulled it away from her when she reached for it. Ford (1996) recounts a similar experience with his own 19 month old child who repeatedly identified a picture of a zebra as a giraffe and laughed "uproariously" each time Ford would correct him.

Between the ages of two and three children will make false statements for a variety of reasons, but they have very little understanding of how their behavior affects or might affect the target of their false statement. Some false statements are simply mistakes based on a limited knowledge of the language they are learning at this time; others can be blamed on poor memory or recall. But sometimes a child's everyday reality is enriched by his or her fantasy life—e.g., "I have a rhino in my room…a real one. I do." Ceci, Leichtman, & Putnick (1992, vii–viii) tell a story about a colleague's 3 year-old child whose false statement, enhanced by fantasy, had more serious implications. The child was watching Mr. Rogers on television with his older sister while his mother worked in an adjoining room. When the child left the television to join his mother, he told her Mr. Rogers had touched his (the child's) pee-pee. At this age, some false statements are the result of wishful thinking—e.g., saying "My dad is going to take me to Disneyland" when Dad has never mentioned this possibility. But perhaps the most common form of false statements at this age involves denials of wrongdoing ("No, Billy did it.") to avoid punishment or wanting to get rewarded for doing something "good"—e.g., "I cleaned my plate, too (when that is not true)."

So, at this age none of the skills typical of adult lying ability (perspective-taking, intentionality, behavioral control) have developed much—at least with most children. Chandler, Fritz, & Hala (1989) conducted an experiment with 2 ½ year-olds and found evidence that *some* children did perform acts intended to mislead others into thinking that something false was true. A puppet hid a "treasure" in one of several containers and children were told the purpose of the game was to hide the treasure from some adults who were searching for it. Some of these children not only erased the tracks left by the puppet to the container holding the treasure, but made new tracks to an empty container. Sodian et al. (1991) also found a few children who were less than three years-old who understood the idea of creating a false belief, but even these children needed prompting and rarely anticipated the effects of their deception on the target's beliefs. Even the presence of older siblings does not seem to help a great deal in facilitating the understanding of false beliefs for 2-3 year-olds, but they can speed up such learning with children 3 ½ and older (Ruffman et al., 1998).

Age 3–6

Children develop a theory of mind and thereby acquire perspective-taking ability typically between the ages of 3 and 5. The combination of this ability and their expanding knowledge of intentionality and social norms leads children in this age range to lie with increasing frequency and skill. A number of studies support this conclusion.

One of the first forms of deception children in this age range employ is the "I didn't do it" variety, which they use to conceal violating requests and orders issued by adults ("Don't eat in the living room", "No jumping on the couch", etc.). Researchers have studied this variety in "temptation resistance" experiments in which a child is seated in a room and a toy is placed behind her. An adult experimenter instructs the child not to peek at or play with the toy for several minutes while the adult leaves the room. The child is covertly monitored while alone in the room and, when the experimenter returns, is asked whether she followed the instructions. Many children don't, allowing examination of whether they confess the transgression or lie (Lewis, 1993; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989). In numerous studies using this procedure conducted worldwide (reviewed in Lee, 2013), most 2-year olds confess but most 3-year olds lie, with the frequency of lying increasing through mid-childhood (see Figure 5.1).

While most children between 3 and 5 lie in this situation, they aren't especially convincing. For example, when 3-year olds lie about peeking at the toy (e.g., a Barney doll) and then are later asked by the experimenter to "guess" what the toy might be, many blurt out its name without hesitation, revealing that they both violated the instructions and lied. As they get older, children incrementally learn to avoid blatant inconsistencies. For example, a 5-year old girl who lied about peeking later said "I didn't peek at it. I touched it and it felt purple. So, I think it is Barney." Many 6-year old peekers subsequently feign complete ignorance of the toy's properties (Evans, Xu, & Lee, 2011).

Around the age of 3, children begin to tell "white lies" in situations for which social norms dictate that they not convey awkward truths. Talwar and Lee (2002) asked 3–6 year-olds to take a photograph of an adult who had a large red mark on his nose. Most children lied to this adult when he asked "Do I look okay for the photo?" but later told someone else that he did not look okay. In a similar study,

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children in this age range were given an undesirable present (a bar of soap) but told the giver that they liked it, even though their behavior while opening it clearly indicated disappointment (Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007).

Ceci & Leichtman (1992) devised several experiments with 3 to 4 year-old children showing that they altered their messages according to perceived listener knowledge. In one study, nursery school children who believed a "loved one" might get in trouble for breaking a toy told a nursery school teacher (who was not in the room when the toy was broken) that they didn't know who broke the toy or that someone else broke it—e.g., a gremlin who flew in the window. But in a subsequent private interaction with their loved one, most of these same children said they had told the truth (that the loved one had broken the toy) to the nursery school teacher. These kids had, in fact, lied twice. Leekam (1992) says that by age 4 or 5, children "understand the effects of a false message on a listener's mind, recognizing that the listener will interpret and evaluate a statement in the light of their existing knowledge." In support of this, Sodian et al. (1991) say that by age 4 most kids have developed an understanding of false beliefs. These children have a lot to learn about how complex the other person's perspective really is and how many different ways it can be tapped, but the basic mechanism for developing this knowledge is now in place.

Despite their sometimes imperfect manifestations of it, this is also a time when we can see a child's early efforts at behavioral control to conceal a lie. In-depth analyses of videos of children's nonverbal behaviors by Talwar and Lee (2002) reveal that those in the act of telling a lie mimic the behaviors of people who tell the truth (e.g., making direct eye contact with the listener). When the situation calls for children to avert their gaze when telling the truth (because they have to ponder the answer to a question), they also deliberately avert their gaze when lying (McCarthy & Lee, 2009). By the age of 6, a child's nonverbal concealment behaviors are coordinated and natural enough to convince many adults that they are telling the truth, including their parents, teachers, social workers, police officers, and judges (Crossman & Lewis, 2006).

Age 6–9

When the young child begins spending time with other children in school, new challenges arise. The process of developing and managing new interpersonal relationships and undertaking new tasks may create new conditions for lying. Ford (1996) says some children experience what he calls "double bookkeeping"—keeping family secrets that might be embarrassing or espousing beliefs that fit one's peer group, but not one's family. In addition, many children this age are spending a lot of time playing board, card, and sports games which highlight the need for deceptive skills in order to win the game. Vasek (1986, p.288) puts it this way: "Games, then, provide a situation in which children can practice deception and its detection, learn about its functions, and become acquainted with the social implications of its use."

So during this period, children are facing a variety of conditions which may prompt them to lie and an increasing variety of situations provide ample opportunities to practice, elicit feedback, and refine their deceptive skills. The teenagers Ekman (1989) interviewed recalled that their first experience in "getting away with" a lie was when they were between age 5 and 7. Whereas some young communicators

will gain confidence in their deceptive ability, others will be reminded that they still have a lot to learn as the following dialogue illustrates (Krout (1931, p. 23).

> "Hello Miss Brown, my son is very ill and, I am sorry to say, cannot come to school today."
>
> "Who is talking?" asked the teacher.
>
> "My father," the boy answered.

This is a time when learning the norms of politeness (which may require deception) is also stressed by adult caregivers. Saarni (1984) promised an attractive toy to groups of 6, 8, and 10 year old children if they performed a particular task for her. After completing the task, the children were given a less attractive toy and their facial expressions were observed. Analysis of the expressions showed that as the child gets older, less disappointment is shown in the face. The girls in Saarni's study manifested this ability to facially mask their disappointment in the name of politeness earlier than the boys.

Age 10–12

By the end of this period, most children have developed adult-like deception skills. By about age 11 they also think about lying and truth-telling differently. Their views are in sharp contrast to five year-olds. For example, most no longer believe it is always wrong to lie and few are willing to say they've never lied (Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto, 1983). Adults, in turn, hold these pre-teens responsible for knowing what they are doing—e.g., "Don't tell me you didn't lie. You knew if you said X that I'd think Y."

This doesn't mean that these kids have nothing more to learn—only that many 10–12 year old children are able to (and do) lie without being detected. Ten year olds with more Machiavellian tendencies may be especially adroit at deception (Braginsky, 1970). Children were promised a nickel for every bitter tasting cracker they could get others to eat. The "high Mach" kids used bribery, two-sided arguments, transferral of blame to the experimenter, and lies of commission and omission. Along with their increasing verbal skills, children in this age range also show a greater sophistication in their ability to manage their nonverbal behavior as well (DePaulo & Jordan, 1982; Talwar & Crossman, 2011). But these encoding skills of 11 and 12 year old girls are likely to be superior to their male counterparts.

Age 13–18

With adult-like deception ability in place at the beginning of adolescence, teens practice their skills in an ever-expanding range of social interactions. In this period, children not only hone their skills, but also develop more sophisticated reasoning about whether and when lying serves their interests. The decision to lie or not depends in part on a consideration of whether it will assist in the attainment of a goal and at what cost. The weighting of various facts in this cost-benefit analysis becomes more complicated with age. In particular, adolescents give more thought to probabilities than younger children, considering not merely the punishment for getting caught but also the different likelihoods of getting caught in

various circumstances. They also consider consequences of getting caught that extend beyond the immediate context, such as disappointment in the eyes of friends, parents, and teachers. In particular, parental disappointment is a consequence that could hinder the expansion of autonomy children crave in their teens. Thus if getting caught seems like seems like more than a remote possibility, a teen might be hesitant to risk this anticipated cost regardless of a lie's immediate benefit (Perkins & Turiel, 2007).

As the first generation to grow up immersed in an online world, teens today have opportunities to deceive via technological channels that their parents didn't have at their age. What's more, teens often exploit their parents' lack of experience and technical limitations to engage in digital deception that can be risky, rude, and sometimes illegal. In a survey of over a thousand teenagers and their parents about online behavior, about half of the teenagers admitted searching the Internet for material they believed their parents would not approve of (pornography, simulated or real violence, etc.); when asked, 86% of the parents didn't believe their children would do this. About 70% of teens overall reported hiding their online behavior from their parents. The frequency with which the young respondents reported digital deception was clearly fueled by their parents' complacency and cluelessness. Sixty-two percent of the parents reported believing their kids cannot get in serious trouble online. Only 4 in 10 parents reported using software to monitor or restrict their children's online behavior; more than half of the children of these parents claimed to know how to bypass it (McAfee, 2013).

Why Children Lie

The motivation for lying during childhood is affected by a variety of factors, including the tasks they face, the kind of relationship they have with their parents, and their own changing cognitive and physical abilities. Scholars who have addressed the question of why children lie have focused primarily on two life stages—early childhood and adolescence.

Reasons for Early Childhood Lies

There is widespread agreement that the most fundamental and common reason for lying at all ages is the desire to avoid punishment for a misdeed (DePaulo & Jordan, 1982; Vasek, 1986). Ekman (1989, p. 19) says, "This is one of the most consistent findings in scientific studies of lying."

When 21 teachers and 80 mothers were asked to identify the reasons why 4 year-olds lie, they too said "fear of punishment" was the primary reason (Stouthamer-Loeber, 1991; see Table 5.1). "Getting one's way" (obtaining something or avoiding doing something by not telling the truth) was another commonly cited reason for lying in early childhood. This study also reminds us, however, that even in early childhood there may be multiple reasons for lying and the perception of these reasons may vary depending on who is making the judgment. Teachers, for example, perceived more instances of not telling the truth to be "joking" than did mothers, but mothers were more likely than teachers to attribute the lack of truth-telling by a 4 year-old as "did not know any better."

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Table 5.1 Reasons Why Four Year-Olds May Not Tell the Truth

Reasons	Percentage of Answers By Mothers	Percentage of Answers By Teachers
Fear of punishment	42.0	44.2
Did not know any better	8.0	14.9
Getting one's way	16.0	14.3
Play or fantasy	2.0	7.1
Protect self-image	12.0	5.8
Tries to please	6.0	5.8
Joking	10.0	2.6
To cause trouble	0.0	2.6
To protect someone	4.0	.7
Unclear	0.0	2.0

Although young children lie most frequently to conceal misdeeds, they also tell "prosocial" lies intended to benefit others out of politeness or altruism. Prosocial lies bring two social norms of communication into conflict—the expectations that a) speakers should be truthful and b) they should be friendly to others. To tell a prosocial lie, children must have an empathetic understanding of another's mental state and the desire to manipulate that state (e.g., Dad is embarrassed about his weight so I will tell him he looks nice). Children may be motivated to tell such a lie not only to benefit someone else but also to benefit themselves, in that it enables them to avoid an awkward interaction or be positively regarded by the person being lied to. However, a truly altruistic lie is told solely for the benefit of another and perhaps at a personal cost (e.g., taking the blame for a friend's wrongful action). Altruistic lies emerge later than polite "white lies" as children learn social norms regarding loyalty in friendship and groups (Talwar & Crossman, 2011).

Early childhood is a time when children are learning about words and body movements and how they are used to effectively communicate with those around them. When lies, deceptions, misrepresentations, and false statements take place, they can be understood as part of this process of learning what is acceptable and what isn't, what works and what doesn't. These rules are primarily learned within the confines of the child's immediate family. But family guidelines are put to the test as the child grows older, forms new relationships, and develops his or her own standards for what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Peer groups, teachers, and a steadily increasing appetite for autonomy provide additional contexts and reasons for lying.

The process of learning how to "make it" in school is one in which daily negotiations teach kids whether deception is useful and whether it is appropriate. Seeking praise and enhancing one's image with both teachers and peers while simultaneously avoiding punishment and hiding image-detracting information from them are central to success in school. They are also goals which often cause students to consider whether and how to deceive (Engels, Finkenauer, & van Kooten, 2006).

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Reasons for Lying During Adolescence

Finding a reason to lie during adolescence is about as difficult as finding a reason to be happy when you've won the lottery. The only reason for some adolescent lies is that the adolescent just wants to see if he or she can pull it off and/or the enjoyment derived from the manipulation. But the apparent ease and frequency with which some adolescents lie may taper off as they become young adults. Even though adolescents and young adults both lie to their parents about such things as friends, dates, and money, Jensen et al. (2004) found emerging adults were less accepting of lying and reported lying less frequently than adolescents. Ekman (1989) interviewed adolescents who identified a number of different reasons for lying. Some of these reasons were basically the same as reasons given by young children—e.g., lying to avoid punishment and lying to get something that couldn't be obtained in other ways.[1] But adolescents mentioned other reasons for lying which reflected matters especially pertinent to their life stage.

Reasons Associated with Peer Group Relations

Some teenagers want to be "popular" with their peers; most just want to be accepted. The process of learning how to be accepted by one's peers presents teens with a number of situations which inevitably involve decisions about whether and/or how to tell the truth. Some common situations include: making themselves look good to others by magnifying or inventing experiences; the invention of negative stories about others in an effort to clearly distinguish oneself from those in the "out-group;" or keeping secrets for or not "ratting" on friends—even taking the blame for something they did. Ekman (1989) found many teenagers willing to lie for a friend. He posed the following situation: "Your friend broke a school tape recorder and you know he or she broke it. Your teacher asks you if you know who broke the tape recorder. Will you tell the teacher that your friend did it?" Less than a third of the teens Ekman interviewed said they would inform on their friend.

The effects of a student's "status" and peer pressure on teenage lying were aptly demonstrated in an experiment designed by Harari and McDavid (1969). Students in two junior high school classes were asked to list five people they considered worthy to represent their class at a school banquet. In one class, the researchers recruited a student who was never mentioned (low-status) and another class they selected a student who was mentioned most often (high-status). These students were then trained to enact the following behavior. When the teacher left the room, they walked to the front of the classroom, threw their gum in the wastebasket, picked up 75 cents laying on a table near the teacher's desk and put the money in their pocket while saying, "Hey, look, how about that?" as they returned to their seat. Students in each class were interviewed about whether they knew who took the 75 cents. Some students were interviewed with a fellow classmate and some were interviewed alone. No one lied to protect either the high- or low-status student when they were interviewed privately. But when they were interviewed with a fellow student, they pleaded ignorance when it came to the high-status student, but didn't mind revealing the identity of the low-status thief.

[1] Adolescent *malingering*, a pattern of feigning illness or inability to avoid work or responsibility, and other patterns of deception rooted in more intense psychological and/or emotional problems will be dealt with in Chapter 8.

Reasons Related to Authority Figures

People who are in charge of various aspects of an adolescent's life can expect there will be some efforts to challenge their power. Unquestioningly obeying the directives of authority figures is linked to a developmental stage adolescents believe is behind them. Secrecy and deception are commonly used by adolescents to level the playing field with authority figures. Recognizing that knowledge gives power, lies of omission ("Nobody asked so I didn't say anything.") are not unusual. It is, of course, more likely when authority figures expect teens to follow orders as if they were young children, do not reward truth-telling, hypocritically hold teenagers to standards of truth-telling they do not adhere to, and act infallible. Holt (1982, p. 254), commenting on the abuse of authority in the classroom and the effects it can have on students, said: "We present ourselves to children as if we were gods, all-knowing, all-powerful, always rational, always just, always right. This is worse than any lie we could tell about ourselves."

Reasons Associated With Growing Autonomy/Independence

During adolescence, children gain an increased sense of autonomy within the family. In the course of their teens, they typically are granted decision making responsibility for an expanding range of behaviors, including choice of dress, friends, and recreational activities. But what happens when adolescents disagree with their parents about the appropriate limits of their autonomy? In some cases, they truthfully express their difference of opinion and deal with the conflict it creates; in other cases, they lie to avoid a clash. In particular, when parents try to exert influence on an issue that young teens believe to be none of their business (e.g., a dating partner), teens may feel justified in lying to avoid what they perceive as a wrongful encroachment on their privacy (Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004). They may also justify lying in terms of adult social norms about deception they are learning—e.g., acting sorry when you aren't, acting like something somebody said didn't hurt when it did, etc.

What About the Parents?

Parents play an important role in determining how often their children lie, what they lie about, and the ethical framework within which lying is viewed. One way parents teach their children about lying and deception is by the way they respond to their child's deceitful and "deceit-like" behavior. Since "not telling the truth" may occur for a variety of reasons and have a variety of consequences, this underscores the need for a variety of responses. When adults vary their responses to young children according to the way the child misrepresents reality, the context in which it is done, how often it has occurred, how much harm it causes, and the apparent motive for doing it, it teaches the child what behavior is permissible and what isn't. This learning process is ongoing and adult reactions may vary considerably to the same behavior performed by a 4 year-old and a 14 year-old. Eighty mothers who recorded 1,171 instances of deception by their 4 year-olds over a period of 12 weeks varied the valence of their responses depending on how they perceived the act in question (Stouthamer-Loeber, 1991).

Table 5.2 Responding to Various Ways 4 Year-Olds Misrepresent the Truth

Behavior	Most Common Responses
	Positive/Neutral
Make-believe friend	Play along
Talking about imaginary things as if they were true	Explain reality
Plays a joke by telling untruth	Play along
	Neutral
Tells about something happening that is not true	Question
Exaggerates	Question
Boasts	No attention
	Negative/Neutral
Says he/she has done something he/she hasn't	Make finish
Denies something he/she has done	Confront/Question
Blames someone else	Confront/Question
Makes up excuses	Discourage

Parents are role models for their children and when children are regularly disappointed in their parents' behavior, receive ineffective supervision, or can't establish a warm parental bond, the probability of their lying increases (Touhey, 1973; Southamer-Loeber, 1986; Southamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986). But the reverse is also true. Parents who perceive their adolescent children engaging in a lot of concealment and lying also seem to exhibit more withdrawal from their child. They are less accepting, less involved, less responsive, and know less about their child's activities and whereabouts (Finkenhauer, Frijns, Engels, & Kerkhof, 2005).

Needless to say, the way parents respond to lying (their own and their children's) will go a long way in determining how their kids behave. Experts say parents should consider the following guidelines:

Adapt Responses to the Life Stage of the Child

Parents should understand, for example, that the unambiguous certainty that "you should never lie" may be more palatable to younger children than older ones. Furthermore, the extent to which parents hold their children accountable for their lies will probably increase as the child learns what behavior is acceptable and what isn't. Although the way it is done may vary by age, parents may want to establish some experiences with their child early and often. For example, the extent to which an adolescent feels comfortable telling the truth to his or her parents is often

the extent to which that comfort has been established throughout his or her development. It means children must have some positive experiences in which they told an unpleasant truth if parents expect that behavior to continue.

Consider the Effects of Double Standards

Some parents don't like to admit it, but others freely acknowledge the fact that they lie to their children and lie to others in front of their children while admonishing their children not to lie. One survey of several thousand parents found 59% of them saying they regularly lied to their kids (Patterson & Kim, 1991). Most parental lies are designed to ease their young child's fears, enrich their fantasy world, or control their behavior. Some appear to be told simply because the parent delights in tricking a very gullible child. A delightful collection of these parental lies (Connolley, 2004) includes the following:

- When ice cream trucks play music, it means they have run out of ice cream.
- My mom used to tell me that there was a banana factory where bananas were bent before they were sold.
- When I was younger, my parents told me that if I peed in the pool, it would rise to the top and spell out my name.

Young children may be more accepting of the fact that it's ok for parents be deceptive even if they are forbidden to do so. But as children get older, they increasingly scrutinize this disparity. Parents who say they lie to their very young children "for their own sake," may find that their children increasingly see such lies as serving the parents' needs—e.g., to maintain power and/or control over their child or to avoid discussing a difficult topic ("Daddy and I were moving some furniture around in our bedroom last night. Some of it was heavy and that was the groaning you heard"). The older a child gets, the more he or she expects to be treated like other adults—including his or her parents. When this doesn't happen, they may adopt the adult behaviors anyway.

Consider the Effects of "Struggling Visibly"

Michael Josephson of the Josephson Institute of Ethics recommends this behavior to parents. He says that all parents are bound to make mistakes and face difficult dilemmas when it comes to communicating and acting on values—like honesty. But instead of blaming others or denying a problem when problems occur, Josephson says, parents might effectively use such occasions to teach children and serve as a role model by talking about the various factors that prompted the particular deception or lie and reflecting on why it occurred and how similar situations are likely to be handled in the future.

Consider the Effects of Reciprocity

In the area of human behavior, we often reap what we sow. Parental honesty may encourage their children to be honest. Trust and respect may beget trust and respect. But dishonesty, suspicion, and distrust can work the same way.

Consider the Effects of Extreme Emotional Reactions

Ekman (1989) says the fear of a parent's intense anger is one of the prime reasons children lie. This doesn't mean parents can't implement punishment for lying nor does it mean they shouldn't act upset. But extreme emotional reactions to unpleasant truths may establish a level of fear that causes the child to do anything to avoid it. The child may think that the punishment for telling the truth is as great as it will be if a lie is uncovered so why not take a chance that the lie won't be discovered. The parental goal should be to understand what led to the child's lie and, if necessary, work with them on ways to change the behavior in the future.

Lie Detection

Kids as Detectors

Experimenters have devised several different procedures for eliciting lies from children. Sometimes it involves saying a bitter-tasting drink actually tastes sweet (Feldman, Jenkiins, & Popoola, 1979; Feldman & White, 1980; Feldman, Tomasian, & Coats, 1999); sometimes they are told to act like they are viewing a pleasant picture when the picture is unpleasant and vice versa (Morency & Krauss, 1982); sometimes they are asked to praise fellow students for giving what they know to be incorrect answers (Feldman, Devin-Sheeham & Allen, 1978); and sometimes children who peek at a toy they were instructed not to look at will lie about what they did (Lewis, Stanger & Sullivan, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999). Videotapes of these deceptive behaviors, along with comparable truth-telling behavior, are then viewed by children of different ages to determine how successful they are at distinguishing honest from dishonest behavior.

Children ranging in age from 3 to 20 have been tested. It is no surprise that kids of all ages were more likely to detect lying in the youngest children. Once a child has reached 6th or 7th grade, their deception skills make detection more difficult. Even though kids can detect deception more accurately with increasing age, they are not likely to exceed the adult norm of detecting deceptive behavior of strangers at slightly better than chance accuracy (see Chapter 9). At all ages, children who are better able to put themselves in the position of the communicator being judged (role-taking) are likely to be capable of better detection. In one study, the child's detection task involved judging adults who were lying about whether they liked or disliked someone (DePaulo, Jordan, Irvine, & Laser, 1982). Groups of students from grades 6, 8, 10, 12, and college were tested. The ability to identify dishonest messages as more deceptive than honest ones did not begin to exceed chance to a significant degree until twelfth grade. In short, good deception detection may not kick in until about age 17.

As kids grow up, they also come to appreciate the fact that it may not always be desirable to accurately detect deception in others. DePaulo & Jordan (1982) found indications that even though girls are capable of detecting deception more accurately than boys, that they will sometimes refrain from reading cues that they

believe senders do not want read. This occurs when liars don't do a particularly good job in covering up the behavioral affect they are trying to hide. Male and female high school students who were skilled at reading covert behavior but did not politely ignore these "leaky" behaviors were rated by their teachers as less popular and less socially sensitive.

When kids are making judgments about dishonesty, what signals do they rely on? Between the ages of 5 and 16, there is a steadily increasing tendency for children to rely on perceived inconsistencies between verbal and nonverbal behavior (Blanck & Rosenthal, 1982; Rotenberg, Simourd, & Moore, 1989). Fourth and sixth graders (but not second graders) are more likely to use indirect eye gaze and active limb movements as signs of deception (Rotenberg, 2003). Four and five year-old kids use eye gaze as a cue when someone hides something and then looks at it (Freire, Eskritt, & Lee, 2004). When interviewed about how they would know others are lying, gaze, smiling, and pitch tended to be mentioned most frequently by 2nd, 4th and 6th graders. Rotenberg (1991) found that sixth graders preferred offering a suspected liar a promise of confidentiality in order to uncover their deception whereas younger children (2nd and 4th graders) preferred the strategy of observing behavioral signs to find out if someone was lying. In general, the cues used by younger children are not elaborate or sophisticated which helps explain why they are not particularly skilled detectors.

Adults as Detectors of Kids

Most research (e.g., Feldman, Tomasian, & Coats, 1979; Feldman & White, 1980; Morency & Krauss, 1982) has found that adults are better able to detect younger than older children's lies. This could be explained by younger children's lies being particularly transparent because children only gradually acquire the cognitive and behavioral sophistication necessary to conceal through control of nonverbal behaviors. Talwar and Lee (2008) also found that children's ability to manage verbal behavior associated with successful lying in the temptation resistance situation increases with age. However, some studies have found that adults were more accurate in judging older than younger children's lies. When Newcombe and Bransgrove (2007) asked adults to rate the accuracy of two conflicting recounts of a children's story from same-aged pairs—one accurate and one inaccurate—they were more accurate in judging older pairs (i.e., 9-year-olds or adults) than younger pairs (4-year-olds). Similarly, Nysse-Carris, Bottoms, and Salerno (2011) found that lay adults and "expert" detectors (prosecutors, police officers, and clinical social workers) were more accurate in detecting lies told in a simulated "high stakes" situation (doing something that children were told could get their parents in trouble) by 6 year-olds than 3 year-olds. These researchers speculate that the older children were more cognizant of the negative consequences of lying than the younger ones, which made them more anxious and thus less able to conceal their lies.

Grady (1997) designed a study to examine the strategies parents used to find out if their adolescent children were telling the truth. While their parents were filling out some forms in one room, their children were taken to another room in

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which they had an opportunity to watch videotapes, read magazines, eat popcorn, work puzzles, listen to music, etc. Each parent was told to interact with their child in an effort to find out what they had been doing. Some parents were told their child might deceive them, but none of the adolescents were told to lie. Parent-child interactions lasted about ten minutes. Parents looked for ways that their child did not normally behave. They adapted strategies to what they felt would work best with their child, but the following were commonly employed: intimidation, gentle prodding ("Come on. Wasn't there anything more than that?"), contradiction ("But when I asked you what was in the room you didn't say a computer was in there."), and self-disclosure ("I remember when I was your age, I looked at some magazines my parents wouldn't have approved of when they weren't around..."). Adolescents influenced the strategies their parents used. Parents tried to make their conversation seem "normal," but short replies and the lack of conversational involvement by their children made some questioning seem more like an interrogation. When their children got upset or impatient with them, parents normally abandoned efforts at detection. Parents, without their child present, were asked to identify deception detection strategies they used as they watched a video of their interaction. Independently, their child viewed the videotape and was asked to identify deception detection strategies on the part of his or her parent. Children accurately identified about half of the strategies the parents said they used so their verbal detection strategies were fairly transparent. The disclosure strategy, however, was rarely identified as a detection strategy.

Judges, social workers, and mental health professionals are *sometimes* able to judge the veracity of children based on their experience with certain traumatic experiences like sexual abuse. When a child involved in a child custody case freely and unemotionally gives details of the abuse and occasionally uses terminology that would more likely be used by an adult, the professional may suspect that the child is repeating a story that his parent wants him or her to tell because actual incest victims are more likely to be secretive, manifest depression, and retract the allegations before restating them (Ekman, 1989). Despite a reservoir of experience and knowledge like the preceding, studies show that experts often find it difficult to distinguish true from false testimony in sex abuse cases (Ceci & Bruck, 1994; Lyon & Dorado, 2008).

So what does all this tell us about lie detection? Not surprisingly, adults and children alike are more likely to detect lies told by very young children with a gradually decreasing accuracy as the detection targets get older. Nevertheless, there are some kids whose lies are difficult to accurately detect in all age groups—including the very young. At any age, most children and adults are not particularly good at detecting deceptive behavior in face-to-face contexts—with the best accuracy rates typically between 50% and 60% (see Chapter 9). As children age, they become better liars, but they also become better detectors and use more sophisticated detection strategies. Parents who suspect their teenager of telling a lie should know that their verbal behavior is likely to reveal their suspicions and will, in turn, elicit defensive maneuvers on the part of their child.

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Children Testifying in Court

In 1983, the mother of a two and a half year-old child called police to report that her son had been sodomized at the McMartin preschool in Manhattan Beach, California. As a result, police and social workers began interviewing hundreds children who were or had been enrolled in the McMartin preschool. Stories of sexual abuse and satanic rituals were commonly reported. In addition to accounts of child rape and sodomy, children reported such things as the killing of a horse, being taken on an airplane to Palm Springs, being lured into underground tunnels where day care workers dressed up like witches and flew in the air, the drinking of blood and eating of feces, and the exhumation and mutilation of bodies from a cemetery. One child said they had been regularly beaten with a ten foot long bullwhip and taken to the Episcopal church where they were slapped by a priest if they did not pray to three or four gods. Sound hard to believe? Not for the prosecutors. Seven people were charged. The seven year trial which captured the national headlines involved a series of acquittals, mistrials, and deadlocked juries. During this time Peggy McMartin Buckey and her son spent several years in jail and spent their life's savings on their defense. In 1990, all defendants were acquitted (Eberle & Eberle, 1993; Nathan & Snedeker, 1995).

The mother who made the original complaint was later determined to be a paranoid schizophrenic. Neighbors and parents who stopped by the day care facility during the day could not corroborate these bizarre happenings and the police were not able to find physical evidence (e.g., tunnels, witch costumes, horse bones, etc.) to support the allegations. This made the testimony of the children all the more important to the outcome of the case. Were these children telling the truth? If not, why? Videotapes of the initial interviews with children were revealing. In these interviews, it was not uncommon for adult interviewers to use leading questions and show children dolls with realistic genitalia ("He did touch you there, didn't he?") and coercion—e.g., praising kids who confirmed the offenses and bizarre happenings and telling those who didn't that they were "dumb." Sometimes the answers children gave to court-appointed interviewers were the result of first being "coached" (intentionally or not) in discussions with their parents. In 2005, one of the children admitted he lied in order to please the people who were questioning him (Zirpolo, 2005).

Even though the McMartin case was perhaps the most widely publicized in the United States, there were several similar cases here and abroad during the 1980s. In addition, the allegations of sexual abuse in child custody cases was increasing at this time with some reporting that between 36 and 50% were later proved to be untrue (Cramer, 1991; Ekman, M.A. M.,1989, p. 164; Green, 1986; Benedek & Schetky, 1985). Given the obvious importance of determining the truthfulness of children in situations like this, researchers have closely examined issues surrounding a child's competency to tell the truth in court and the extent to which they are subject to adult influence or "suggestion."

Children's Competency to Tell the Truth

In *Wheeler v. United States* (1895), the court determined that age, by itself, was not a good measure of whether a person is likely to tell the truth or not. Instead, competency is usually based on: 1) Can the child witness recall and describe past events? 2) Does the child witness know the difference between a truthful statement and a lie? and 3) Does the child witness understand his or her obligation to tell the truth in court? Some very young children could meet these criteria even though they often don't testify. Sometimes the competency exam is done in the courtroom and sometimes it is done by the judge in his or her chambers.

The ability to recall and describe the central facts of past events is normally not a problem for most children, even the very young. However, we also know that children typically do not report events as fully, coherently, and with as much detail as adults. If the event is stressful or associated with one's "private" parts, the reliability of children's reports can be affected in several different ways. For example, Saywitz, Goodman, Nicholas, & Moan (1991) had 36 girls between the ages of 5 and 7 given a physical exam in which their vaginal and anal areas were examined. Only eight of thirty-six 5–7 year-old girls reported it. But three girls from another group of 36 girls who were also given a physical exam without any examination of their vaginal or anal areas reported that this part of their body *was* examined.

Do children know the difference between truthful statements and lies? A number of studies provide support for the claim that by age 4 or 5 most children, but not all, are able to distinguish lies and truth (Bussey, 1992a; Bussey, 1992b). Taylor, Lussier, & Maring (2003) found most 5 year-olds capable of making the distinction between pretending and lying and Haugaard & Reppucci (1992) found most 4–5 year-olds understood that it would be a lie if their parent asked them to say something happened when it didn't or to make an inaccurate statement to protect a friend. These studies also point out that the way children conceive of a lie changes as they grow older. For example, young children are prone to see lies as deviations from what they perceive as factual reality, but beginning around age 8 or 9 the communicator's intent is increasingly used as a key distinguishing factor. Since their repertoire of experience is more limited, younger children are more likely to make accurate distinctions between lying and truth-telling if they are asked to judge examples they are familiar with. The reliability of children distinguishing mistakes and lies is likely to reach adult standards around the age of 12. It is important to remember that even adults are sometimes far from perfect in their ability to make such distinctions. Peterson, Peterson, & Seeto (1983) found half of the adults they tested labeled an exaggeration as a lie and 30% of them labeled an act of admitted guessing as a lie.

The difficulty in determining a young child's ability to distinguish between truthful statements and lies can be seen in the following dialogue excerpted from an actual competency exam. Notice how important it is to adapt one's language use to the level of the child and to clarify responses. Even though the child in this case was certified as competent to testify, it is not surprising that the defense did not agree.

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Is this Child Able to Tell the Difference Between Lying and Truth-Telling?

Question: Let me ask you this, Linda. When you said a minute ago that you didn't know whether you would or would not tell the truth, what did you mean by that?

Answer: I don't know whether I would tell the truth or not.

Question: Would you purposely tell a lie, or make a mistake?

Answer: That's right.

Question: Which is right? That you might purposely tell a lie?

Answer: Huh uh.

Question: Or that you might make a mistake?

Answer: (Nodded head).

Question: I want to be perfectly sure what you mean. Do you mean that you would not purposely tell a lie?

Answer: No.

Question: Of course anybody can make a mistake. For instance, if you ask me what time it is and I would say 11:00 o'clock' and I would be wrong, but that wouldn't be a lie because I thought it was 11:00 o'clock. That is just a mistake. Did you mean that kind of mistake, or a deliberate mistake on purpose? That is, would it be a deliberate mistake or accidental?

Answer: Accidental.

The Court: The Court will accept her as competent.

*Excerpt from competency exam of 6 year-old girl in *Kiracofe v. Commonwealth* (1957).

There hasn't been a lot of research bearing on the issue of whether children understand their duty or obligation to tell the truth—especially in the courtroom. Viewing lying as a negative value probably precedes viewing truth-telling as a positive value. But as children age, many will come to realize that while lying isn't always bad, there are certain contexts in which truth-telling is paramount. Peterson (1991) found a majority of 6–9 year-olds thought it was worse to have a memory lapse in court than at home and worse to tell a self-protective lie in court than at home. A slightly higher percentage of undergraduate college students felt the same way.

One technique commonly used in most U.S. courts to increase truthtelling involves requiring witnesses to promise to tell the truth prior to testifying in court. Empirical studies have demonstrated that explicitly asking children to make this promise significantly decreases children's lie-telling. For example, Talwar et al. (2004) found that children between 3 and 11 who had made a promise to tell the truth were less likely to tell a lie concealing a transgression their parents had committed.

Interestingly, making children promise to tell the truth in court seems to deter lie-telling more than discussing the morality of truthtelling with a judge, as is required in moral competency examinations in U.S. courts (Evans & Lee, 2010).

Suggestibility and Children's Testimony

One reason child witnesses give false testimony is that they are coerced or misled by adults. Is it true, as some believe, that given the right conditions, an adult can get a child to agree with virtually anything he or she tells them—despite the child's recollections to the contrary? Maybe. It is true that children between the ages of three and five, as a group, are more suggestible than older children and adults. But we also know that children who are highly resistant to adult suggestions are found in all age groups. In addition, the same child may be highly suggestible in some situations and not others (Eisen et al., 1998; Doris, 1991). The following are common ways that adult interviewers exert influence over the recollections of children (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ceci & Bruck, 1995).

Interviewer Biases

It is not likely that the adult professionals who normally interview children in abuse cases enter the interview without any preconceptions of what happened. Children may detect these expectations and biases and allow them to enter into their memory of an event. A common way this is done is through the use of leading questions. Adults, as well as children, are subject to the effects of leading questions, but very young children are especially susceptible. Sometimes interviewers intentionally introduce new ideas and interpretations with leading questions in an effort to affect the child's memory of an event. This process, known as "coaching," is most effective when the child knows the interviewer or coach and is motivated to please him or her. For example:

> Child: "I saw Billy hit Mary."
>
> Adult Interviewer: "I know you *think* you saw Billy hitting Mary. And maybe it looked a little like a hit, but could it have been a push? Maybe Billy was just playing with Mary and you didn't see that she pushed him first and then he pushed her. Could that be what happened?"

Another way interviewers can convey their biases is by mentioning inferred traits of the people involved in an event—e.g., "Did you see the bad man hit the woman?" (Leichtman & Ceci, 1995). If the child accepts the claim that the man is generally "bad," then she might be more likely to misremember events in a way that confirms the trait ("Hitting others is the kind of thing that bad people do, so maybe I did see him hit her").

Selective Reinforcement of Information Provided

Let's assume a child is being interviewed and the interviewer suspects sexual abuse. Whenever the child mentions anything that fits the interviewer's expectations, but not with other information, the interviewer becomes attentive—encouraging the child to talk and telling the child how good they are to talk about this with the interviewer.

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Peer Pressure

Young interviewees may be told that other children have already said that a particular act or event occurred. This can be a powerful force in leading the young child to an altered recollection. Principe and Ceci (2002) found that leading questions combined with either the presence of peers or a discussion of the event with peers led to inaccurate reports and the addition of information which was not experienced for these very young children.

Dolls with Realistic Genitalia

Since virtually all the dolls children play with do not have realistic genitals, this feature will draw their attention in a leading manner. While such dolls were believed to be helpful in interviews with children suspected of being sexually abused, research does not indicate that the dolls add any validity to a child's responses (Ceci & Bruck, 1993).

Garven et al. (1998) compared the more persuasive questioning techniques used by the McMartin interviewers with the use of suggestive questions alone. The McMartin approach that used peer pressure, question repetition, and selective reinforcement elicited more than three times the number of false accusations as did the suggestive question approach.

Young children are most suggestible on matters that they don't care a lot about. These may be issues or events that are unfamiliar to them, lack personal meaning for them, or pertain to details they see as peripheral or irrelevant. But some children may be more suggestible in a variety of situations—particularly those who have negative or unreliable life experiences and perceive they have little power (Bugental, Shennum, Frank, & Ekman, 2001). Scullin & Ceci (2001) developed a method to measure a child's general tendency toward suggestibility. Children are shown a ten minute video of a birthday party. In the video a fire alarm goes off, a toy gets broken, one child drops ice cream on his lap, etc. Following the video, children are asked 18 questions, some of which have false or suggestive information in them—e.g., "When Andrew broke the toy, was it an accident or did he do it on purpose?" But Andrew did not break the toy. Then the children are questioned again in the context of negative feedback about their answers to the questions. They are told they made mistakes. Four weeks later they are tested again. The extent to which children *yield* to the suggestive questions and *shift* their answers after they are told they made mistakes is the extent to which they are determined to be suggestible.

The legal system in the United States has recognized that the testimony of young children can also be altered by the presence of a perceived threat (Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2004). As a result, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed child abuse victims to testify over closed-circuit television when the presence of the accused will create "serious emotional distress" (Maryland v. Craig, 1990). In 1999, the same court extended this privilege to children who *witness* a traumatic event like sexual abuse and can prove serious emotional distress will occur in the presence of the person they are accusing. In both cases, there is an opportunity for the defendant's lawyer to cross-examine the witness. These decisions were designed to protect the child witness and ensure truthful testimony, but they are also contrary to the 6th Amendment of the United States Constitution which gives the accused the right to confront those who accuse him or her of a crime. Some also believe

that the use of closed-circuit testimony also tells the jury that the defendant is a person whom children fear for a good reason—because he or she is guilty. Orcutt (1998) did not find this to be true, but her experiment did not involve a defendant accused of rape or assault either.

Obtaining Accurate Child Testimony

Very young children can produce fairly accurate accounts of their experiences when they are interviewed in a non-suggestive and neutral manner. However, as we noted earlier, there are a variety of possible pitfalls associated with interviewing child witnesses. As a result, the following guidelines have been proposed (Davies, 2004; Saywitz & Geiselman, 1998).

- Establish pleasant surroundings for the child.
- Begin the interview with rapport-building small talk which is unrelated to the testimony. Tell the child that he or she knows what happened and the interviewer doesn't so the child is just being asked to tell the truth about everything he or she remembers. The child is instructed that it is ok to say, "I don't know" or "I don't understand," but the child is also asked to make a promise to tell the truth. During this phase, the interviewer may also want to demystify the legal context and allay fears associated with it.
- Begin by asking the child an open-ended question about what is remembered about the incident in question. Let them talk uninterrupted.
- Children often respond without much elaboration so questioning is the next step. Interviewers should understand that even though probing is likely to elicit more information, it may also increase the chances that the child will provide more incorrect information. Interviewers should do everything they can to avoid leading questions; to use appropriate age-adapted language; to avoid condescension, accusation, or intimidation; and to be open to more than one explanation of what happened.
- Conclude the interview on a positive note and with a brief summary of how the child's testimony is understood.

Even skilled interviewers who try to follow the preceding guidelines may sometimes find themselves using imprecise language, making incorrect assumptions, and unintentionally leading a child witness to false testimony. Consider, for example, the child in the following interview who has *not* been to his or her grandmother's house on the day in question. The interviewer's second question may be interpreted by the child as "have I *ever* been to Grandma's house?" (Vrij, 2000, p. 115).

> Adult: Where have you been today?
>
> Child: (No answer)
>
> Adult: Did you visit Grandma perhaps, have you been to her house?
>
> Child: (Child makes a head nod)
>
> Adult: OK, that is nice, did you like it at grandma's place?
>
> Child: (Child makes another head nod)

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Summary

There are certain cognitive and behavioral abilities that children need in order to engage in what most adults in this culture call lying. The child must be able to understand that other people see things in different ways than they do and that they can mentally make contact with some of the other person's reality through a *theory of mind* and *perspective-taking*. Lying also requires children to have executive functions like inhibitory control so that they can conceal the truth they are trying to mislead others about. They also must understand *intentionality* and the *social norms* operating in different contexts where they might consider lying. A lie is intentionally performed to change another person's reality. In addition, children must learn that the other person has intentions, too, and may be trying to detect deception. In many contexts, social norms dictate that it is wrong to lie (e.g., lying to avoid punishment), but in others the norms encourage deception (e.g., expressing gratitude for an undesirable gift). Children must be able to distinguish between these contexts in order to weigh the costs and benefits of lying in a particular situation. They also need to have the communication skills to perform the deceptive act. This requires a linguistic repertoire, an understanding of situational norms and expectations, and the ability to manage/control their own behavior in a manner consistent with the lie being told.

Before the age of four children engage in some "deceit-like" behaviors, but most of these children do not have the necessary cognitive and behavioral skills for lying as it is understood by most adults in this culture. By four or five years-old, many children seem to have installed the basic deception program. From this point on, we see a gradual refinement of their cognitive and behavioral skills necessary for lying. Going to school provides an expanding number of relationships and opportunities for testing these skills. By the time they are 11 or 12, their skills are well-developed and lies are difficult to detect even though there is still room for considerable refinement. Lies are most easily detected with very young children, even though there are some kids who lie without being detected at all ages.

Children lie for a variety of reasons, but avoiding punishment seems to be the primary one. Dealing with popularity, status, and influence in peer groups; learning to deal with authorities; and seeking greater independence/autonomy are tasks which gain importance during adolescence and which provide additional occasions for lying and deception.

An important part of understanding the lying of children is found in the behavior of their parents. It is not unusual for parents to lie to the children they are asking to tell them the truth. Parents will sometimes argue that they lie to their children to protect them, but these lies are often performed to protect the parents themselves—to avoid having to talk about a difficult topic, to maintain power or control over their child, etc. Experts say parents need to adapt their teachings on honesty and lying to the developmental stage of the child; to be careful of asking older

children to adhere to rules the parents break; to avoid pretending that they know all the right answers in front of their children, but show them how they continue to struggle to do better; to recognize that they are a model for their children and their children may behave as they do; and to make sure the punishment for children who tell the truth isn't just as severe as the punishment for lying.

The extent to which children can and will tell the truth in a court of law became a major issue after several cases involving charges of widespread sexual abuse in day care facilities in the 1980s and simultaneously increasing charges of sexual abuse in child custody cases. Even though young children do not often testify, those who do must pass a competency exam which tries to determine if the child is capable and willing to tell the truth. Children are capable of reporting the basic facts of an event, but details are often obtained through interviewing. Suggestibility through these interviews has been a major focus of social scientists. Some children are generally more suggestible than others, but suggestibility can be induced in most children through intimidation, accusation, leading questions, selective reinforcement, peer pressure, and dolls with realistic genitals.

Things to Think About

Compare human and nonhuman deception by noting similarities and differences in the four levels of deception in nonhuman deception (Chapter 4) and the developmental stages of human deception abilities in this chapter.

What could have been done to improve Linda's competency interview?

Interview one parent who has a child who is either age 4, 5, or 6; interview another parent with a child who is either age 11, 12, or 13. Neither parent should be your own. Compare their answers and indicate what you learned. Use follow-up questions as needed, but ask these basic questions: 1) Has your child ever lied to you? 2) If so, about what? If not, why not? 3) If your child has lied to you, how did you deal with it? 4) Did you ever lie to your child? 5) If so, about what? If not, explain what counts as a lie for you. 6) What is the most important thing to teach children about honesty? 7) What is the best way to teach children about honesty?

Interview one child who is either age 4, 5, or 6; interview another child who is either age 11, 12, or 13. Neither child should be a sibling. Compare their answers and indicate what you learned. You may also want to comment on your own interviewing behavior. Use follow-up questions as needed, but ask these basic questions: 1) Did you ever lie to your parents? 2) If so, about what? If not, why not? 3) Did you ever get caught in a lie to your parents? What happened? How did they react? 4) Has either of your parents ever lied to you? 5) If so, about what? If not, how do you know? 6) What is the most important thing for parents to teach their children about honesty? 7) What is the best way for parents to teach children about honesty?

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