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Brief Report

The effects of punishment and appeals for honesty on children's truth-telling behavior



Victoria Talwar*, Cindy Arruda, Sarah Yachison

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec H3A 1Y2, Canada

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effectiveness of two types of verbal appeals (external and internal motivators) and expected punishment in 372 children's (4- to 8-year-olds) truth-telling behavior about a transgression. External appeals to tell the truth emphasized social approval by stating that the experimenter would be happy if the children told the truth. Internal appeals to tell the truth emphasized internal standards of behavior by stating that the children would be happy with themselves if they told the truth. Results indicate that with age children are more likely to lie and maintain their lie during follow-up questioning. Overall, children in the External Appeal conditions told the truth significantly more compared with children in the No Appeal conditions. Children who heard internal appeals with no expected punishment were significantly less likely to lie compared with children who heard internal appeals when there was expected punishment. The results have important implications regarding the impact of socialization on children's honesty and promoting children's veracity in applied situations where children's honesty is critical.

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Introduction

Honesty is fundamental to human verbal communication. We assume and desire others to be truthful. Socially, lying is discouraged and can have negative ramifications for relationships, and it

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: victoria.talwar@mcgill.ca (V. Talwar).

arguably “can significantly damage the foundations of our moral character, particularly our capacity for moral growth” (Mertz, 2004, p. 171). Folklore and religion are rife with stories of those who lie and are punished for their “evil” ways such as Aesop’s Peter, who falsely cried wolf and was later punished by losing credibility. Generally speaking, lying is considered to be an inappropriate behavior, and chronic lying tends to be associated with other antisocial and delinquent “problem” behaviors in children (Bok, 1978; Gervais, Tremblay, Desmarais-Gervais, & Vitaro, 2000). Thus, research on the factors that promote honesty in children is important for answering questions about the development of morality and how to encourage truthfulness in children. The aim of the current study was to examine how appeals to tell the truth influence children’s honesty and whether expectation of punishment for a transgression attenuates the influence of such appeals.

Promoting children’s honesty

Although research has found that children’s lie-telling behavior emerges during the preschool years and develops rapidly with age (Evans & Lee, 2011; Lewis, Stanger, & Sullivan, 1989; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002, 2008; for reviews, see Lee, 2013; Talwar & Crossman, 2011), most research has examined children’s lie-telling in relation to children’s cognitive development. Relatively little research has examined factors that attenuate lying and promote children’s truth telling. There is some evidence that asking children to promise to tell the truth increases truth telling in children (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008; Talwar, Lee, Bala, & Lindsay, 2002, 2004). In addition, research examining the effects of reassuring children that they will not get into trouble has found mixed results, with increases in truth telling reported but also, in some circumstances, increases in false reports or no effect at all (e.g., Lyon & Dorado, 2008; Lyon et al., 2008, 2014). However, the mechanisms for the effectiveness of such appeals are unclear. Truth promotion is premised on the notion that children’s dishonest behavior is in part determined by their perceptions of the consequences of honesty and dishonesty (Bandura, 1991; Bussey, 1992; Lyon, 2000). For example, abuse victims often report that their decision to disclose was affected by their expectations about how others would react to their disclosure and the effects of disclosure on themselves and others close to them (Anderson, Martin, Mullen, Romans, & Herbison, 1993; Goodman-Brown, Edelstein, Goodman, Jones, & Gordon, 2003). Recently, Lyon et al. (2014) reported that children were more likely to reveal another’s transgression if they believed that the instigator had confessed. Furthermore, research has shown that children’s perceptions of expected punishment can influence the likelihood that they will lie (Bussey & Grimbeek, 1995; Talwar & Lee, 2011). For instance, Talwar and Lee (2011) found that children who could expect corporal punishment for their transgressions were more likely to lie about a transgression and were better able to conceal their lie compared with children who had no expectations of corporal punishment. Thus, children’s motivation to lie may be affected by whether they expect negative consequences for disclosing the truth versus positive consequences for telling the truth.

The role of external and internal factors in influencing honesty

One way that such appeals may influence behavior is suggested by the social cognitive theory of moral action (Bandura, 1991), which proposes that people’s behavior is heavily influenced by what they believe will happen as a result of the behavior. External and internal factors shape people’s outcome expectancies and actions. Thus, external and internal factors may influence children’s decision to tell the truth. Namely, young children rely almost entirely on guidance from others to encourage their behavior. This can be through external physical factors (i.e., punishments) or external social factors (i.e., social sanctions of others such as pleasing another person) (Bandura, 1986). In addition to external social factors, children are also influenced by internal social factors (i.e., pleasing themselves by doing the “right” thing). Furthermore, the influence of external and internal factors may change with age. Over time, children internalize moral standards held by their parents and society and become increasingly influenced by internal social factors (Bandura, 1986). In this study, we examined the influence of external appeals that emphasized pleasing another person on children’s honesty as well as the influence of internal appeals that emphasized telling the truth to please oneself in children aged 4 to 8 years.

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