



FIND A STATION

SEARCH

Search is supported by:

[home](#)[news](#)[arts & life](#)[music](#)[programs](#)[listen](#)[News > Science > Research News](#)[Web Resources](#)[The 'New York Magazine' Article](#)[E-mail](#)[Share](#)[Comments \(0\)](#)[Recommend \(6\)](#)[Print](#)

< Research Sheds Light on Why Children Lie

Copyright ©2008 National Public Radio®. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

*Heard on Day to Day*text size **A** **A** **A***February 14, 2008* - MADELEINE BRAND, host:

Roger Clemens, Brian McNamee - one of them was lying when they testified yesterday about whether or not Clemens had taken steroids. Well, no matter how much we as a culture deplore it, we're a bunch of liars. Studies have shown that the average adult lies at least once a day. And kids do it too. Some as young as two years old tell lies. They do it for various reasons, one of which, well, they learn it from us. Po Bronson writes about children and lying in this week's New York magazine and he joins me now. Welcome to the program.

Mr. PO BRONSON (New York Magazine): Thanks so much. It's fun to be on.

BRAND: So you went over several studies. One involved teenagers. And no surprises there, that they lie to their parents about what they're doing. But then you also write about studies involving small, small children. Tell me about those.

Mr. BRONSON: These studies were done by Victoria Talwar, one of the world's leading experts in children's behavior, at her lab in McGill University, where she simultaneously observed children at play with their parents to overhear and see when are they lying, as well as she uses paradigms where they tempt kids to lie. Routinely they have them play a little game where they're tempted to, when the researcher's out of the room, peek to see what the toy is. And when the researchers come back in, they know what the toy is and they can win a prize. And they're meant to make these kids lie, and they do.

And then they're also testing how well they can maintain the lie, you know, to try to make it sound plausible - sort of like what we were hearing from Clemens and McNamee defending their lies - and test their ability to do that. As well as white lie experiments.

BRAND: Well, is that such a bad thing? You know, I mean I think sort of as a social lubricant and, again, as sort of a way to teach compassion, that might be a good thing for parents to...

Mr. BRONSON: Great question. And you know, we think of white lies as good. And in the experiment a parent watches their kid tell the white lie, the parent like cheers, like oh good, my kid can do it. And I've certainly been the parent to my young children who didn't tell a white lie and I'm terribly embarrassed. But what kids turn out to be, not growing out of learning to lie, but actually growing into it. And yes, they're telling white lies but they're learning to be disingenuous on a daily basis, and learn as you get comfortable with avoiding conflict by using dishonesty as a tool.

BRAND: So the white lie being, oh, I loved the gift when I really didn't love it.

Mr. BRONSON: Right, the gift from grandma. Instead of getting you the action figure, you know, she gets you a book.

BRAND: So they're taking these white lies and they're kind of using the lesson to lie in general?

Mr. BRONSON: Yes, there's this sort of emotional framework for getting comfortable with being

disingenuous and avoiding conflict. Another thing - parents, we tell our kids not to tattletale, don't tell. And we're doing the right thing. We want the kids to learn to have the social skills to work it out on their own. However, you know, tattling becomes one of the worst things a kid can be called on the elementary school playground. And it sort of becomes reinforced in a way that kids are learning to hide things from their parents. I'm not saying these are bad. I'm just saying this is the reality of how kids learn to lie. You know, about a third are going to become very pervasive, common liars throughout childhood, while other kids by the age of seven will kind of have the tendency mostly socialized out of them.

And then in junior high you're going to see another spike, some because of the type of parenting they have, and perhaps what kind of behavior they have to cover up, are going to lie more and some are going to lie a lot less.

BRAND: So what's a parent to do if you want your child to, well - not not lie, because it's just not going to happen, but lie a little less?

Mr. BRONSON: Well, first, avoid entrapping your kids in lies. The wisdom there is not to increase the punishment or the threat of punishment when a kid lies, to actually really teach the importance of honesty. So rather than lying's bad, say honesty is good. I was in a circumstance with my son where he came home from his first grade classroom and he was acting like a teenager who was saying I don't care, I don't care to anything asked. Did you do your homework? I don't care. I'm like where did this come from? And I couldn't help myself, I was like did you learn that at school? And he froze.

And in that moment I could see what was clicking through his head, which is am I going to rat out my friends? My friends or my dad, who do I choose? And I suddenly backed off and I didn't want him to be in that circumstance. So I backed off and I said, look, you don't have to tell me who at school told you and no one at your school is going to get in trouble if you just tell me you learned it at school. And he was able to back off and relax and say, yeah, dad, I learned it at school. And then he gave me a big hug and said, you know, I really do care. He was just trying out this new phrase he'd picked up that day. And then I told him how great and important it was that he told me the truth.

BRAND: Po Bronson, his article on children and lying is in this week's issue of New York magazine. Po, thank you.

Mr. BRONSON: Thanks so much, Madeleine. Take care.

Copyright © 2008 National Public Radio®. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to National Public Radio. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.

E-mail Share Comments (0) Recommend (6) Print

Research News

Chimps May Mourn Lost Ones, Study Suggests

Fungal Disease Spreads Through Pacific Northwest

FDA Warns Pfizer On Overdoses In Drug Study

Podcast + RSS Feeds

Podcast RSS

Research News

Day to Day

Talk of the Nation Ne



Hear the show and get prev.

Enter E-Mail Address

comments

Discussions for this story are now closed. Please see the [Community FAQ](#) for more information.

news

- U.S.
- World
- Opinion
- Politics
- Business
- Technology
- Science
- Health
- Sports

arts & life

- Books
- Movies
- Pop Culture
- Food
- Performing Arts
- Games & Humor

music

- Concerts
- You Must Hear This
- Interviews & Profiles
- Music News
- Music Blogs
- Rock/Pop/Folk
- Jazz & Blues
- Classical
- Browse Artists A-Z
- All Songs Considered
- From The Top
- JazzSet
- Marian McPartland's Piano Jazz
- Mountain Stage
- Song of the Day
- The Thistle & Shamrock
- World Cafe
- World Of Opera

programs a-z

- Morning Edition
- All Things Considered
- Fresh Air
- The Diane Rehm Show
- On The Media
- On Point
- Talk of the Nation
- Tell Me More
- Weekend Edition Saturday
- Weekend Edition Sunday
- Car Talk
- Wait Wait...Don't Tell Me!

listen

- Hourly News
- NPR Program Stream Schedule
- Find Station Streams

more

- Multimedia
- Columns
- Blogs
- Analysis
- Commentary
- NPR Ombudsman
- Topic Index
- Sponsor NPR
- NPR Shop
- About NPR
- Jobs & Training
- Press Releases