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The Effects of Parenting Styles on Prosocial Lie-Telling Behaviors in Young Children

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Deception is a normative human behavior, but not all deception is created equal. This review of recent literature demonstrates that the ability to tell a lie is a cognitive milestone and that deceit may be used with both prosocial and antisocial intentions. Research indicates that children who have the cognitive capacity and the emotional intelligence to tell prosocial lies are often the result of parents who employ the authoritative parenting style. More specifically, a preschool-aged child's ability to tell a prosocial lie (i.e., one that spares feelings or avoids conflicts) is heavily influenced by family climate and parenting technique. This review examines the effects of parental modeling and cognitive development of young children with regard to a young child's ability to tell a prosocial lie. The implications of parents modeling socially appropriate deceptive behaviors, as well as parental fostering of empathy and perspective-taking abilities, is discussed.

Honesty is often considered “the best policy,” and mutual trust is the basis for most satisfying relationships. Even so, deception is a normative behavior, and some even consider lie-telling a cognitive milestone (Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2015; Nagar et al., 2020; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Ramos et al., 2019; Talwar et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017). All deception is not created equal, however, and most people would argue that telling a “white lie” (also known as a “prosocial lie”) in an effort to spare feelings or avoid confrontation is acceptable behavior (Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Mojdehi et al., 2020; Nagar et al., 2020). Prosocial lie-telling is a nuanced, altruistic behavior that is socialized primarily through environmental factors such as parenting styles, parental modeling, and family contexts (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015; Ramos et al., 2019; Talwar et al., 2017), as well as through cognitive advancements such as developing empathy or perspective-taking abilities (Lavoie et al., 2017; Lavoie et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015; Nagar et al., 2020; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Ramos et al., 2019; Talwar et al., 2017;

Williams et al., 2017). Both environmental socializing agents and cognitive developments impact an individual's assessment of appropriate lie-telling.

The ability to tell a prosocial lie is associated with the development of a child's moral values. The family is the basic context for moral development, and parents are generally the most important socializing factor in a young child's adoption of moral values (Karmakar, 2015; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Ramos et al., 2019; Talwar et al., 2017). The parenting style that is most conducive to internalizing a set of moral beliefs is the authoritative style, which is characterized by high expectations, parent-child interaction, autonomy granting, and warmth (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Padilla-Walker & Son, 2019; Talwar et al., 2017). Parental modeling is also important to the internalization of moral values, as preschool-aged children typically follow their parents' social cues (Dystra et al., 2019; Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Malloy et al., 2019; Mojdehi et al., 2020). Because moral development is intimately related to deceptive behaviors, prosocial lie-telling is most often found among young children whose parents exemplify the authoritative style and model its tenets accordingly (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017).

An additional element of moral development that is requisite to be able to engage in lie-telling is the cognitive achievement of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking—or in other words, conceptualizing that another individual's viewpoint differs from one's own—is a developmental milestone and is part of a complex cognitive process that fosters the development of empathy and assists in determining when it is appropriate to lie (Nagar et al., 2020). Perspective-taking is necessary for both deception and honesty (Ma et al., 2015; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020) and is an essential social-cognitive skill (Lavoie et al., 2017). When parents encourage their children to take on the perspective of others through

practices of inductive reasoning, children are more likely to experience empathy, which is an important emotion to the development of morality (Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Nagar et al., 2020; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020). The authoritative parenting style advocates for the development of cognitive abilities like perspective-taking more than any other parenting style (Karmakar, 2015; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020).

Additionally, the authoritative parenting style increases empathy, inductive reasoning abilities, and perspective-taking through equitable parent-child exchange, parental warmth, responsiveness, and sensitivity (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). This authoritative parenting style influences a child's morality, which in turn influences the child's use of deception. As a result, preschool-aged children who are capable of both prosocial and antisocial lie-telling have reached the developmental period wherein perspective-taking is possible, and this cognitive milestone is facilitated through effective parenting.

Clearly, the development of morality is a multifaceted and complex process that provides the foundation for a child's ability to determine whether or not telling a lie is a moral action. Although lie-telling behaviors in young children are influenced by a variety of factors, young children whose parents exhibit authoritative parenting styles are most likely to engage in prosocial lie-telling because their parents model the social appropriateness of polite lies and because authoritative parenting promotes the development of perspective-taking and empathy. This process is facilitated specifically through a parents' use of inductive reasoning when teaching their child about deception. This literature review will first examine the effects of parental modeling on preschool-aged children's prosocial lie-telling behaviors and will then discuss the impact of parenting style on the development of perspective-taking abilities.

Parental Fostering of Prosocial Lies

Direct Teaching

Parents are the main socializers for their children, and parental influence in fostering moral development is more poignant than any other relationship (Malloy et al., 2019; Mojdehi et al., 2020; Talwar et al., 2017). Parents teach their children about morality through direct and indirect means, including through direct messages, indirect communication, and modeling behaviors (Dystra et al., 2019; Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). Parents who employ the authoritative parenting style are more likely to discuss with their children the appropriateness of both prosocial and antisocial lies (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). A parents' direct explanation about when it is acceptable to lie and their modeling of such behavior

influences a child's acquisition of guilt and empathy responses (Lavoie et al., 2016), which in turn affects how and when the child employs deception.

Parental Modeling

Young children are highly impressionable and are easily influenced by the behavior of those around them. Children tend to look to others for social cues about how to behave in certain situations, and parents are typically the primary agents for social modeling (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). Children are highly receptive to examples of acceptable behavior, in addition to explanations of it. Additionally, a child's lie-telling appears to be context and domain specific, indicating the nuanced nature of deception—especially in regard to prosocial lies (Dystra et al., 2019; Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2017). Children who have examined the contexts in which their parents tell white lies are more likely to replicate that same behavior if given the same situation (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). Parents who employ parental modeling in an authoritative context typically produce children who are more perceptive to the subtleties of the type of lie-telling that is employed in specific social situations. This link is largely because authoritative parenting often leads to the internalization of moral values (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019; Mojdehi et al., 2020).

The Importance of Direct Messages and Modeling

Although parents normally model appropriate deceptive behaviors, their direct communication on the topic can be contradictory. Parents often teach young children that lying is unacceptable in all situations, but parents often do not apply this same rule to themselves (Lavoie et al., 2017; Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). As such, children may find it difficult to reconcile the discrepancies between what a parent says and how a parent behaves. For example, Lavoie et al. (2016) found that although parents explicitly convey to their children that lying is objectively inappropriate, parents themselves were far less honest than they deemed themselves to be. In turn (and consistent with their parents' behaviors), children who told lies were doing so in a manner inconsistent with their moral beliefs. Since children (and parents) do not always act in accordance with their moral standards, emphasizing and exemplifying the benefits of truth-telling rather than the negative effects of lie-telling is a beneficial way to promote honesty (Karmakar, 2015). Regardless, children whose parents taught that lying is sometimes acceptable told far more lies than children who were taught that lying is never allowed (Lavoie et al., 2016). At times, it can be difficult for young children to reconcile the differences between what a

parent says and what a parent does, which is why parental modeling is so crucial.

This critical component of parental modeling is best manifested through parenting style. Parenting style acts as a moderator for navigating otherwise contradictory parental behaviors that are modeled to children. Authoritarian parenting styles that are critical or impose rejection influence young children to believe that lying is appropriate in the contexts of self-interest or conflict avoidance (Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). When authoritarian parents act in ways that are contradictory to what they have taught their child, the child quickly learns not to mention it for fear of punishment (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). Conversely, authoritative parents are most likely to directly explain these nuances to their children in a positive way, which will encourage the child to follow their example (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019; Ramos et al., 2019). The “do as I say, not as I do” mentality of parenting can be difficult for children to navigate, especially young children. Thus, it appears that the emotional climate that the parents create is critical in whether children come to understand the difference between prosocial lie-telling and lying in general, and whether or not they employ it. An environment centered on fear like those commonly fostered in authoritarian homes can lead to mistrust, and may influence children to use deceit in order to avoid punishment (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). Conversely, a family climate that encourages warmth and trust like those characterized by authoritative households generally yield children who employ deception for more prosocial reasons (Lavoie et al., 2016; Malloy et al., 2019). Clearly, both direct messages regarding deception and parental modeling of deceptive behaviors are crucial for young children to develop the morality that leads to prosocial deceptive tactics. These messages and demonstrations of prosocial deception are most commonly found in a parental climate that fosters warmth and trust, like that of the authoritative parenting style. (Lavoie et al., 2016; Dystra et al., 2019).

Parental Promotion of Cognitive Development

Fostering Perspective-Taking Abilities

Perspective-taking abilities are a pre-requisite to both honesty and deception, and are an important component of morality in general (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). Perspective-taking lends itself to a young child’s development of Theory of Mind, which can influence the way a child governs themselves in social situations. Theory of Mind (ToM) is the cognitive ability to recognize that another person has a perspective that is distinctly different than one’s own. ToM is an essential

aspect of deception, because it requires an individual to recognize that another persons’ perspective is not their own (Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2015; Talwar et al., 2017). Developing ToM is a cognitive milestone that has been observed in children as young as three years old, and this ability becomes more developed and refined as executive functioning skills improve (Dystra et al., 2019; Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Nagar et al., 2020). At around age 11, children experience a cognitive shift that causes their lies to move from being self-oriented to other-oriented (Nagar et al., 2020), indicating a developing acquisition of empathy, selflessness, and reduced egocentrism. Children who exhibit a mature ToM are more likely to lie with prosocial intentions because they understand their impact on the emotions of others and desire to treat others positively and respectfully (Lavoie et al., 2017; Mojdehi et al., 2020; Nagar et al., 2020).

As is evident, cognitive and moral pre-requisites often precede lie-telling. These pre-requisites are typically fostered within the context of the family, over which parenting style has a profound effect. In regard to the cognitive milestones of empathy, executive functioning, and perspective-taking skills, young children tend to respond most favorably to a parenting style that elicits these qualities, particularly the authoritative parenting style. (Lavoie et al., 2018; Ma et al., 2015). While authoritarian parenting styles are associated with children who lie more frequently in order to avoid consequences (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017), authoritative parenting styles most commonly produce children who have higher empathy and perspective-taking abilities, are more other-oriented, and are more socially competent overall (Lavoie et al., 2018; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Talwar et al., 2017). The combination of a young child’s developing mind, developing morality, and receptivity to parenting style is crucial to a child’s understanding of prosocial deception. Regulatory cognitive abilities are impacted by parenting techniques; namely, that positive parental control increases the development of regulatory function in young children (Talwar et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2017).

Fostering Executive Functioning Skills

Additionally, parenting style affects executive functioning (a cognitive skill necessary for telling lies), and research shows that authoritative parenting usually brings about children who are capable of telling a prosocial lie and maintaining it, a skill known as “semantic leakage control.” (Lavoie et al., 2017; Talwar et al., 2017) This phenomenon is noteworthy and ironic, seeing as children with the greatest cognitive development and typically the most social competence can actually be the most skilled liars (Lavoie

et al., 2017; Talwar et al., 2017). Specifically, Lavoie et al. (2017) found that young children with low ToM tended to tell instrumental (antisocial) lies, while older children with the highest Theory of Mind were most often polite liars (Lavoie et al., 2017). Although prosocial liars have the social skills necessary to maintain a lie after they have told it, they usually do not exhibit antisocial problem behaviors. Conversely, children who manipulate instrumental lies may be the most socially adept, but they also have the most antisocial behaviors (Lavoie et al., 2017). But regardless of the social context, the cognitive ability to maintain a lie is a developmental milestone (Lavoie et al., 2017; Talwar et al., 2017). Parental influence affects this cognitive development, and the moderating influence of parenting style in lie-telling behaviors is due in large part to the promotion of increased empathy and developed executive functioning skills which are evident in young children with authoritative parents (Lavoie et al., 2018; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Talwar et al., 2017).

The executive functioning skills that develop in preschool-aged children become increasingly important in adolescence as well. The future ramifications of parental influence on morality is particularly prevalent in the teenage years, as adolescence is a critical time period of cognitive development, as well as the peak of deception (Dystra et al., 2019; Karmakar, 2015). Parents who promote autonomy and are supportive typically produce adolescents with a high internalization of moral values, while overly controlling parents negatively affect this process (Karmakar, 2015). Adapting parenting styles to a child's developmental age enhances the likelihood of well-developed morality (Dystra et al., 2019; Karmakar, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Son, 2019). Authoritative parents who teach young children about the appropriateness of prosocial lies and continue that training through adolescence generally produce teenagers who are more socially competent, morally stable, and empathetic as a whole (Dystra et al., 2019; Karmakar, 2015; Padilla-Walker & Son, 2019).

Authoritative parenting can occasionally be a dual-edged sword, however. Specifically, Lavoie et al. (2018) found that because authoritative parenting is characterized by high love and high expectations, children may at times lie more often to authoritative parents, because along with a recognition of parental expectations comes the desire to not disappoint them (Lavoie et al., 2018). These findings indicate further evidence of preschool-aged children's developing cognitive abilities; namely, a child who can take on the perspective of their parent may lie to avoid consequences. Additionally, in research performed by Ma et al. (2015), the results showed that children whose parents were more authoritarian actually had children who lied less. These findings were likely due to the underdeveloped ToM

apparent in children whose parents are overly controlling, as well as the reality that fear-based punishments rarely lead to an internalization of moral values (Ma et al., 2015). Authoritarian parents often do not promote empathy or perspective-taking, so the cognitive development necessary for deception may be stunted. These findings indicate that authoritative parenting can have some negative effects, although these specific results do represent outliers in the literature. Generally speaking, the authoritative parenting style typically promotes the most prosocial behaviors in children, especially in regard to the development of Theory of Mind.

Conclusion

While parental modeling, perspective-taking, and parenting styles are extensively researched topics, this literature review has examined the ways that each of these variables interact, specifically in reference to the development of morality and deceit in preschool-aged children. Lie-telling emerges early (Dystra et al., 2019; Lavoie et al., 2016; Lavoie et al., 2017; Nagar et al., 2020) and is predominantly influenced by parenting practices (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). The authoritative parenting style in particular is associated with parental modeling of prosocial behavioral engagement and promotion of perspective-taking. This style of parenting in turn lends itself to producing young children who best understand the nuanced methods that are employed when telling a lie—especially a prosocial one (Lavoie et al., 2018; Padilla Walker & Memmot-Elison, 2020; Talwar et al., 2017). Ironically, when employed correctly, deception (which is typically deemed a maladaptive or undesirable behavior) can actually lead to socially acceptable behaviors—those that avoid confrontation and spare feelings. The implications of this research are noteworthy, as parents directly and indirectly convey to their children that in certain social situations, empathy is more important than truth. Young children are typically capable of navigating this ethical dilemma when parents are warm and engage in an authoritative parenting style (Karmakar, 2015; Lavoie et al., 2018; Talwar et al., 2017). Consequently, young children who understand when it is acceptable (and unacceptable) to be dishonest typically prove to be the most socially competent.

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