

## Children of the Lie

*Some of the most curious conversations I have with parents include this phrase: 'My child would not lie to me.' Lying, as much as it is ethically a conundrum, is practised in any community, and this essay examines the types and motives that used in our day-to-day exchanges.*

Ask any school principal to identify a recent development in their work that creates significant stress, and most would cite complaints from irate parents, particularly from parents who try to protect their child from the consequences of their behaviour. When you consider the demands foisted on schools over recent years, it is amazing that this is now one of the greatest stressors. However, as more and more teachers are forced to take on the parenting role for their efforts, they are subjected to parental abuse when a student gets into trouble. When these complaints are made to the school, invariably they are based on the child's account of the issue. Parents find it easier to believe anything that the child says and take no notice of the school's version. It's easier to blame the teachers than to accept their own responsibilities. These difficult parents only account for a small proportion of the school community, but they are significant, and their numbers are on the rise.

A great many parent-teacher interviews focus on a dispute, and eventually the point of disagreement hinges on the statement, 'My child would not lie to me.' This is the most common defence used by these families. If the child is not lying, the inference is, then the school, the principal, deputy, or teachers must be peddling deceit.

These disputes often end up in the hands of the school district supervising officers who, it seems, more and more often cling to the business mantra 'the customer is always right.' Those in the schools feel that their leaders pay lip service to the support of their employees and leave them unprotected. The parent is vindicated. The lie is sustained.

So, do kids lie? Do any of us lie? Do we all lie? Any examination of evidence, contemporary and throughout history, shows that lying is a well-documented and practiced strategy. However, in recent times, not only is the use of lying on the increase but there is a growing acceptance that it is a valid practice. In a competitive world, the use of deception to get an advantage is applauded. In fact, it may get you elected to federal parliament!

At the root of this emerging problem is our huge indifference to the lies our politicians and public leaders tell.

Just how indifferent we have become is seen by our response to world events. There are few people who believe that all those years ago Lee Harvey Oswald assassinated President Kennedy, shot him with a miracle bullet from a position where Oswald had no view of his target. A world watched and accepted the execution of perhaps the most popular leader of

the free world without even as much as a whimper. The people had no response to a lie of this magnitude. Should we expect any other response today?

During recent elections in our country of Australia, the then-sitting prime minister, John Howard, made a series of election promises. After he secured enough votes, those promises became an issue. Suddenly there was a difference between promises and what he truly meant, core promises. He thought we understood that. What he failed to realize is that the public expected no better. Nothing happened. We gave him permission to up the ante.

As a nation, for the first time we invaded another sovereign state and declared war on a foreign population who had made no threat to our country. This declaration of war was justified on the back of a lie. Weapons of mass destruction did not exist, and the liars were aware this.

The cost has been enormous both in resources and lives. That lie didn't matter; we don't care. We should accept—but we don't—that because of our indifference we are responsible for these losses. As a nation we condemned a significant proportion of humanity to death.

It is this remarkable indifference to the moral decay of our leaders, the people who send us to war and shape society, that directly leads to the moral standards our children inherit.

The politicians and community leaders must be somehow aware that they lie. They lie instead of telling difficult truths, and they cover their lies by using the services of professional liars, spin doctors, or public relations firms. Every political party has them, and politicians know their value, the value of staying on-story no matter what the question.

It has become easy for our leaders to accept the deceit. As a society we never hold them to account. However, they are mistaken if they interpret our indifference as a sign that we believe them and trust them. They are not generally respected, and surely they cannot respect themselves.

Our indifference has a cost. It is a loss of resources, civil liberties, and a healthy environment. But there is a more condemning loss. We are producing a generation who believe in the lie. Not only do they believe in the lie, they know they can rely on their parents' support to undermine those who are attempting to build their character. Instead of parents being horrified by their child's lack of integrity, more and more often they are aggressively endorsing their child's action.

Before I become too cynical and supercilious, we need to make a close examination of lying and how it has developed.

Lying, the art of deception, is not unique to humans. It is a practice that is used throughout the natural world and has evolved because it gives an advantage to the individual.

The basic premise of evolution is that an unusual characteristic of a particular plant or animal, which made it either more equipped to survive or more attractive for breeding, ensured that this characteristic was passed down from generation to generation.

For example, some plants have learned to deceive particular insects by giving off the odour of the female insect's pheromones. The scent attracts the males who are trying to identify potential mates. Through this deception, this lie, the plant gets to distribute its pollen on the desperate male, who will deliver it on to the next receptive plant. The lie the plant tells ensures the species survives. Is this a bad lie?

Watch the courting displays of animals throughout all of nature; they concoct a range of deceptions to increase their chances to reproduce. The drive is so strong that any advantage gained through trickery is valid. Lying is obviously an effective ploy to ensure success.

Are we like the animals? When it comes to attracting a partner, deception is the name of the game. Much of human activity, particularly during the breeding age, is dedicated to making us attractive partners. Look at the world of fashion, make-up, plastic surgery, membership at the gym, etc. Is this not evidence of our willingness to deceive to attract a mate? Men are so desperate; there is a product to make us irresistible to the opposite sex, achieved by applying pheromones to our skin. The owners claim that the odour is so effective that it drives women wild with sexual desire. This lie sells! Our drives are as basic as the animals'.

In his article 'Natural Born Liars,' published in *Scientific American Mind*, David Livingstone Smith cites research that has shown that, as in nature, the best liars have a competitive edge in the mating game. It is evident that there is a high and significant correlation between social popularity and the ability to deceive. The most popular adolescents are those who lie best.

In fact, statistics taken in the United States show the following:

- 98% of students believe 'honesty is the best policy' lie.
- One in every four students believes it is OK to lie.
- 84% believe you need to lie to get ahead.
- 80% in a high-achieving school believed it was OK to cheat on exams.

These are US statistics. Arguably, there would be a similar finding in Australia. Perhaps a test of our own honesty would be how we respond to the same enquiry.

So, there is an argument for lying to get ahead, but this is obviously not the only reason for lying.

Scott Peck, the American psychiatrist and philosopher, describes three types of lies. These are white lies, black lies, and evil lies.

White lies are those we tell to avoid embarrassment for others. 'Do these slacks make my bottom look big?' asks the wife. To tell the truth may be a dangerous tactic, so the husband replies, 'Of course not,' (thinking, *Why do you always blame the slacks?*). So we accept the white lie; we don't want to crush someone's esteem with the truth.

An interesting aside here is that there is a gender difference in white lies. Women are more likely to lie to make the other person feel good. This may be their maternal instinct coming out. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to lie to make themselves look good. I think, to avoid a lie, a 'No comment' from me will be in order here.

However, I suspect the answer 'No, of course not' to the question regarding the slacks could be one of Peck's black lies. These are lies you tell to avoid consequences. If the truth were, 'Yes, they do,' it could ignite severe, long-term, and painful consequences. Black lies are used to avoid such consequences.

It is the use of these black lies that is the major concern for schools.

Finally Peck describes the evil lie. According to him, such a lie may be truly believed by the person who tells it. That is, he or she considers this account of a situation to be accurate, to be the truth, despite evidence to the contrary.

Truth is an account of perception, and so for these people, the evil lie is the truth. People with severe mental illness can really believe their account of events is truthful. In their perception, it is true. The rest of us may have a completely different interpretation of the event. This is one of the tragedies of mental illness.

However, there is another type of malicious lie that can be called evil. That is when a person tells a lie, often, with such conviction, that the reality they experienced is replaced by the lie they want so desperately to believe. The lie crosses over in their belief system, and to them becomes the truth.

Purveyors of propaganda—political, economic, or religious—know this to be true. When faced with an uncomfortable truth, they tell stories, often with assurance and through a 'trusted source.' Eventually the relief of accepting the lie replaces the distress experienced when confronted by the truth. When acceptance is complete, the evil lie has succeeded.

Even this description provided by Peck does not cover the complexity of lying. There are more reasons to lie other than avoidance or to get a competitive edge.

A common type of lie, told particularly by children and young adults, is one of inflation. This is the kind of lie in which people exaggerate their abilities and achievements. At the simple level, this type of lie is made to shore up a poor self-image. People think, *If they knew the truth, they would not like me*. These liars are easily seen as boastful or conceited, but the motivation behind the lie is to hide their real sense of self. The proverb, 'Empty vessels may make the most sounds' has currency, but how sad is it to believe that you must make that sound to hide that empty vessel?

Other lies of inflation are those in which children in particular tell stories that reflect their personal aspirations and dreams rather than the current reality. Often this over exaggeration is just the expression of a healthy, even overconfident self-image. When a young player declares that he or she is the best player on the team, it may be an illusion, or it may also be an aspiration.

Sadly, some students take the opposite tact; they lie to discount their abilities. Any exceptional talents and abilities will make individuals stand out. For adolescents, the need to fit in and belong is so strong that standing out in any way puts them at risk of separation. As a result, they may hide their abilities behind deception. They will deliberately fail to do their best.

Yet another type of lie, almost specifically in the domain of teenagers, is the lie that is driven by their need for independence and self-determination.

Some parents, as well-meaning as they are, find it difficult to grant that required independence. They deny the longed-for autonomy of the adolescents. In fact, unless this self-governance is given, there will inevitably be conflict. If the parent does not give independence in the right amount at the right time, children will take it when they can.

The greatest control children have is of information. A common way they exercise their freedom is by lying through omission. For example, say they made a detour on their way home from school to hang out in the park with friends. When they are confronted by angry parents who demand to know where they were, their answers are likely to be as follows. '

- 'Where have you been?' 'Nowhere!
- 'What did you do?' 'Nothing!'
- 'Who was there?' 'No one!'

As hard and painful as it is, parents must progressively give up the control of their children. The trick is to give up the right amount at the right time.

Again the 'honest brokers' in government reinforce the development of a generation who will lie. Systematically and through legislation, they are taking away the child's right, in fact their need, for independence.

Through improved health and nutrition, adolescents are reaching puberty at a much earlier age. The maturation of their bodies drives the maturation of their minds. These kids, who have the bodies of adults, need to be given their independence and a resulting sense of responsibility earlier rather than later. If they are not, the opportunity to learn independence will be passed. It is a classic case of 'use it or lose it.'

But what is happening? We are delaying our children's right for independence. They remain school kids longer and are told what to do well past the time they reach physical maturity. Society now complains that young people 'party hard' into their thirties and on. 'They are not responsible!' is the cry of too many parents and officials. We have failed to see that by delaying their opportunities for independence we have held back their development.

Politicians are putting up the age when children may leave school. They make the claim that by staying in school you will become a better economic asset. This claim is based on research that shows that people who left school at a later date made more money.

Any undergraduate at a reputable university who made such a statement would be laughed out of class. Of course there is a correlation, but it's not causal. Bright people earn more, and bright people stay in school longer. The false logic is reflected in Philosophy 101: If  $A = B$  and  $B = C$ , then  $A$  must equal  $C$ . No!

Again the politicians are misleading us. Are they trying to manipulate employment figures? If so, it becomes a dangerous lie. Unfortunately, again, our boredom and contempt are allowing them to think they have our approval.

It is however, Peck's 'black lie' that produces the most grief for teachers and principals. This black lie occurs when a child lies to avoid blame or punishment. Children have learned to use the famous Bart Simpson defiance: 'You didn't see me, and you can't prove it. I didn't do it!' Even adults use a version of this. When people are pulled up by the police, the common wisdom, cultivated from legal advice, is to deny and keep denying until either the police give up or start to doubt their own perception.

The kids will lie because they fear the consequences of their actions. I am sure that this is not confined to kids. There would be little need for the courts if people did not lie.

This black lie is more likely to be developed in families and schools where punishments are too harsh. At lots of meetings I have heard parents boast about how hard they are on their kids to make sure that they don't lie. What they don't understand is that for the children of

these unforgiving parents the truth is a poor option. Rather than developing honesty, they force the child to tell a lie.

These insensitive parents often bring with them the dual problem of having unrealistic expectations of their children. If a child knows something is beyond her ability, and she knows how disappointed her parents will be when she fails to meet those unattainable goals again, a lie will seem to be the best solution.

Now we will deal with the issue facing schools. When parents are in dispute with the school over claims and counterclaims, a common statement is, 'I can tell when my child is lying!' This is a major illusion suffered not only by parents but also by many teachers.

Research shows that most liars can fool most people most of the time. However, the overconfident, self-assured parents often refuse to believe the fact that their child has lied. The most common evidence they cite for their extraordinary powers is their ability to interpret body language. They believe, as do many experts, that people act unnaturally when lying. For example, they look up and to the left, and they refuse to look the interrogator in the eye.

There is a successful television series called *Lie to Me*. It is based on the work of well-known American academic Paul Ekman, who is an expert on 'facial action coding.' He is famous for his ability to interpret facial expressions. He claims to be able to identify liars, and he is used by some law enforcement agencies. However, even with his abilities and equipment, the approach is problematic and time consuming. In the show based on him, the leading man, Lightman, solves crimes through his ability to detect liars, but as Ekman states, 'Lightman is always more certain than I am about everything. He solves in twenty-four hours what sometimes takes six months.' What chance do we have in making accurate decisions on the spot?

Some experts make the claim that the eyes are the windows of the soul. What a romantic concept. Books have been written and courses run to support this view. However, when he put it to the test in strict research conditions, McClellan, another academic, found ample evidence that demonstrates an observer's chance of picking a lie was no better than that attributable to chance. Charles Dickens knew this when he made a note in his book *Hunted Down*: 'I have known a vast quantity of nonsense talked about bad men not looking you in the face. Don't trust that conventional idea. Dishonesty will stare honesty out of countenance, any day in the week, if there is anything to be got by it.'

I personally remember both parents of a boy who had been suspended for fighting. The son claimed he had not been in the fight, and based on this they were demanding that the suspension be lifted.

I had statements from five witnesses and the other combatant, who confirmed that their son had indeed been in a fight. However, these parents insisted that their child was innocent; he would not lie to them. The six witnesses must be the liars! Trusting the evidence I had, I kept the boy suspended. This experience of parents demanding that consequences should not be imposed because they 'believe' their child is not unusual; it is becoming more the norm than not.

What made this interesting was that on the next day the boy's paternal grandfather came to the school to add weight to the claim that this boy would not lie. During this conversation the grandfather told me that when his son, the boy's father, was young, he had been arrested and faced criminal charges. The then-teenager had professed his innocence and his father had spent a good deal of money fighting the charges. Eventually the son had gotten off.

Fifteen years later, the son told his father that in fact he had committed the crime. He had lied his way out of it. I don't think any of the family got the irony of this event. Nevertheless, despite this knowledge, this family subjected me to a huge level of harassment and stress.

This story reinforces the fact that lying is a skill children learn, and beyond doubt they learn it from their parents and role models.

When the phone rings and a child hears his father, for example, saying, 'If that's work, tell them I'm not home,' he is hearing his parent lie, and he learns that this is acceptable. There are endless examples of these almost-acceptable personal interactions that we do tolerate. We as adults know that when certain colleagues say, 'I'll call you back' there may be no call, but kids are concrete thinkers. When they observe this interaction, they are unaware that this lie has some sort of social acceptance in the adult world. To them, you have lied, and you have found that to be OK.

'I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' These are not the words we like to hear, unless we are fond of being interrogated. But what is the truth? A simple definition is that the truth is what really happened. To interpret what really happened, we need to run our observations through our belief filters.

Observations can be direct; that is, we can see them with our own eyes. Even this has problems. For years people looked around and saw that the world was flat. That was the truth. The earth was at the centre of the universe, and the sun moved across the sky.

This truth was so much *the* truth that the representatives of the Church were prepared to kill anyone who questioned it. Free thinkers, who saw an alternative view 'with their own eyes' did well to conceal their truth with a lie or face the same consequences as did Galileo—the threat of execution. The truth could see them burned at the stake. So even



when we see it with our own eyes, the accuracy of our truth is still dependent upon existing knowledge.

Another form of perceived truth is an opinion we rely on. When a story is prefaced by 'I was told by an expert' or 'the accounts came from witnesses' or, the ultimate truth, 'I read it in the papers,' the truth of that story relies on the perception of another.

If recognizing truth is such a difficult thing to establish, why bother?

One of the proper tasks that should be taken by every student is the journey to self-actualization and maturity. This is the real duty of education. It is only through the search for truth that maturity is achieved. It is the understanding of truth that distinguishes cleverness from wisdom. Today we celebrate the former, and we will pay for our neglect of the latter.

As pointed out at the beginning of this essay, there is an advantage in lying, but this advantage is only in your interaction with others. You may not be wise to admit your flaws and shortcomings to others when you want something from them, but if you want to accept yourself and be at peace with yourself, you must accept these flaws. All people make mistakes, so when you make a mistake, you are like all people. You become a perfect person—that is, perfectly imperfect.

So how do you teach kids to be honest? There are four steps:

1. Expect honesty from them all the time. Spell it out. 'At this school we respect and expect honesty. This is the way we are.'
2. Make it easy for the child to tell the truth. Acknowledge that they, like all of us, make mistakes. They have *made* a mistake— they *are not* a mistake.
3. When they tell the truth, celebrate the fact that they have shown their true character and it is good. Give them plenty of credit.
4. Model the truth. This is the key to developing the truth in your kids. It's hard to do, but then again, most worthwhile things are hard.

Time is running out for the children of the lie. Through self- deception, the lies we as a nation and a world have told and have been told, coupled with the inability of our leaders to be honest, has provided a toxic legacy.

We should be ashamed, but I think it best we don't tell.