

# Little white lies

Most parents tell lies to their children to try to change their behaviour, writes **Glynis Kozma**

"If the wind changes direction your face will stay like that." A warning I often heard from my parents whenever I scowled at them. They weren't alone in using white lies to try to control my behaviour. Research published in the *International Journal of Psychology* reveals that 84% of parents in the United States lie to their children in order to influence behaviour, what they eat, and demands for treats and toys.

Lying often starts with the tooth fairy and Father Christmas. Is this harmful? Mother, Anna Holmes, has a seven-year-old son. "I think the tooth fairy and Father Christmas are more about creating magic



**"I think the tooth fairy and Father Christmas are more about creating magic than lying"**

than lying. I asked my son if he was annoyed when he discovered they weren't real; he wasn't at all. But he did say that he feels annoyed when some adults assume he still believes."

I had a hard job convincing my son that Father Christmas even existed despite the fact he had just visited his nursery. "He's not real," he announced. "I could see his false beard." Oh dear. "There is more than one Father Christmas," I explained, weaving another web of deceit.

There is no end to the white lies parents tell. "I tell my son he can't have biscuits because they contain nuts," Emily said. "Is he allergic to nuts?" her friend queried. "No, but I make sure he thinks he is!"

One mother told her child, "I can't hear when it's dark, so shout for Dad if you need anyone during the night."

I asked Teresa Bliss, educational psychologist, what she thought of parents

telling lies. "Children are lied to by adults around the globe across all cultures. Children hold onto lies like the tooth fairy, the Easter Bunny and Father Christmas because they enjoy the magic. I've known a parent who refused to lie about these and later on her children told her she should have not been so principled. A child I once taught was about to go to Pakistan for some months and the day before she went she tried very hard to pull out a loose tooth because, she told me, the tooth fairy doesn't visit Pakistan." Bliss described how her own daughter suddenly stopped eating bread. "I eventually found out why. An older relative had tried to encourage her to eat the crusts, 'to make your hair curl.'"

What do parents lie about? Bliss explained, "With young children who want to watch a programme on television, parents will often tell them it's not on. This

Research has shown that 84% of parents lie to children

is a lazy way to avoid confrontation. Be too long the child will be able to read and use the remote control. So a parent is postponing having to say no. Another frequent lie is that children who misbehave will be taken away, or the parent will call the police. These are not good lies. Children need to have secure boundaries; parents who resort to these types of lies undermine their authority, which can be frightening for a child."

Children look to their parents as role models. They hear us saying, "If the phone's for me I'm busy, so say I'm not here." But are there good lies and bad lies? Bliss says, "Life is not black and white, and we can't pretend to children that it is.

White lies help us manage our lives. Platt introduced the concept of the 'noble lie' where it was acceptable for the elite to lie to pursue an agenda for social harmony. Children don't see how lies work in society they risk being naive and not understanding how others might manipulate them."

Acceptable lies often include praising your child's artwork from school where Daddy looks more like a spider!

Although recent research suggests that lying to children may damage family relationships, it depends on what kinds of lies are told.

Using lies to control your child's behaviour, as an easy way to temporarily keep the peace, is not advisable because as your child matures they will see the lies for what they are and your authority will be diminished.

Children need to learn that white lies can sometimes exist to manage relationships. As Anna Holmes explains "I want my son to know that if any future wife asks, 'Does my bum look big in this?' he gives the right answer!"

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