

Stop lying to your 4-year-old, new Stanford study says

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Pretty much every parent of a young child has told the occasional white lie to preserve his or her sanity. You might, for example, say "I went to the bank" and leave out the fact that you also stopped for frozen yogurt

to avoid the inevitable meltdown that would follow the realization of a missed treat.

Harmless, right? Maybe not.

According to a new Stanford study, kids as young as 4 are pretty skilled at spotting "sins of omission" and then judging the adults who perpetrate them.

That may be bad news for some parents, but it's good news for child development experts, who say such an early ability to detect when technically accurate information is misleading bodes well for the educational progress of children.

"If children are sensitive to others' informativeness - for instance, able to distinguish less informative teachers from fully informative ones - that will be helpful for their future learning," said Hyowon Gweon, an assistant professor of psychology at Stanford and the study's lead author. "Because not everyone is equally informative, this ability can help children decide 'Who should I learn from? Who should I approach for more information?' "

In one experiment involving 4-year-olds, her team taught children about two toys, one with just one function and another with four functions. Then the kids watched back-to-back videos of puppets teaching Elmo about the toys.

The puppet who was supposed to be explaining the four-function toy, however, showed Elmo only one of its functions.

The children were having none of it.

Seventy-two percent of the kids liked the more informative [teacher](#)

better, which suggests even very young children are learning which adults to trust and which adults to be suspicious of.

"It is funny to see how their little minds start reasoning," said Ashley Vendel, one of the head teachers at Early Bird Preschool in San Mateo, Calif. When she greets the children each morning with a short version of her previous evening by saying "I watched a new TV show," for instance, they press her for more information because they know she's not telling them everything.

"They ask 'But what else did you do?' " Vendel said.

So what does this mean for parents and Vendel's fellow teachers?

"Because omission can either be useful or misleading depending on the context," Gweon said, "[parents](#) and educators should be mindful of [children's](#) sensitivity to 'informativeness' and understand when omitting [information](#) is helpful and when it can be a 'sin.' "

So if you throw the frozen yogurt evidence away before you pick up your child at pickup, you're probably fine.

They're not mind readers - yet.

But if your kid spots a yogurt-stained napkin in your car, he or she may be less likely to buy into the story that your time away was full of boring errands.

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