

Whether children lie depends on the social environment, says study

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Everyone lies—some more, some less. Children are no different. An international team of economists has now investigated the influence of the parental home and upbringing on a child's propensity to lie.

The key findings: Children from households with a high socio-economic status are more honest compared to children who grow up in more precarious conditions. A compassionate parenting style and a high level of trust are also associated with honesty. However, the desire to lie is not set in stone. Participation in a mentoring program in elementary school results in a higher level of honesty—even many years after the program has ended.

The economists Fabian Kosse (University of Würzburg), Johannes Abeler (University of Oxford) and Armin Falk (University of Bonn) are responsible for this study. They have [published](#) the results of their research in the current issue of *The Economic Journal*.

A dice throwing experiment brings the truth to light

"We investigated the question of which factors determine young people's preferences for honesty and to what extent these preferences can be changed," says Kosse. The researchers tested honesty with a very simple experiment. The children were asked to roll the dice and predict the number that the dice would show before rolling. If the prediction and result matched, they received a small amount of money.

The special thing about the experiment: The children were unobserved while rolling the dice and no one could check whether their prediction was correct or not. The children could therefore be sure that a lie would not be uncovered.

The rest is statistics: "If everyone tells the truth, about one-sixth of the participants, or about 16.7%, would provide an accurate prediction," says Abeler. In fact, however, more than 60% claimed that the prediction and the result of the dice matched. This in turn means that a large proportion of the children must have lied.

Differences in the extent of the "willingness to lie" became apparent when the scientists took a look at the children's social background. "Our evaluations clearly show that children from richer households are more honest. In addition, we find a higher degree of honesty in children who experience a warmer parenting style and a higher degree of trust in their [family environment](#)," explains Abeler.

Data from more than 700 families

For their study, the researchers were able to draw on data from households in Cologne and Bonn. In 2011, they invited families with children born between September 2002 and August 2004 to take part in a panel study.

More than 700 families then took part in the first wave of the study at the end of 2011 and provided information about their income, level of education and whether both parents lived in the same household. This was accompanied by a survey on the parenting style and behavior of children and parents.

Subsequently, 212 children from socially or educationally disadvantaged families—i.e., households with a low income, in which neither parent had a certificate entitling them to study at university or in which one parent was a [single parent](#)—were randomly invited to take part in the mentoring program. The control group consisted of 378 children who grew up under comparable conditions who did not take part in the program.

"As part of the mentoring program, called 'Balu und Du,' volunteer mentors spend one afternoon a week with the children over a period of around one year and engage in joint social activities, such as cooking, playing soccer or doing arts and crafts," says Falk, explaining the offer for the 212 children.

The program aims to broaden a child's horizons through [social interaction](#) with a new caregiver and to provide them with a warm and trusting environment—an important factor in developing honesty, as it allows children to experience the long-term benefits of telling the truth.

The scientists found their hypothesis confirmed in the results of their study: "Children who took part in the mentoring program were more honest overall," explains Kosse. While 58% of the [control group](#) cheated, only 44% of the treatment group did so. "This is a big effect. It is similar in size to the difference between girls and boys," says Kosse.

According to the researchers, this effect speaks for the success of the [mentoring program](#). As the study was conducted about four years after the children had taken part in the program, this is also evidence of a long-term and lasting change in behavior.

Overall, the study shows that preferences for honesty can indeed be changed and that they can be changed through appropriate measures. Early childhood interventions can therefore not only improve a child's performance, but also influence their social and moral behavior.

More information: Johannes Abeler et al, Malleability of preferences for honesty, *The Economic Journal* (2024). [DOI: 10.1093/ej/ueae044](https://doi.org/10.1093/ej/ueae044)

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