

Mini-EdPsych Q & A – Dr. Victoria Talwar

Moral Development:

Exposed: Liars, cheats and scams

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How should an adult react when they know a child is lying?

First, it is important to remember that lying is a normal part of development. Most children start to lie around 3 to 4 years of age. So we shouldn't feel shocked when we see children start telling lies it is normal and most children learn with time that "honesty is the best policy". Of course, everyone tells lies from time-to-time including adults. When a child lies, adults should stress the importance of telling the truth. It is important that children understand that they can get in "double" trouble for lying about a transgression, whereas if they tell the truth this will receive some recognition (even if they still have to accept the consequences of their transgression). Children learn that lying is not a useful strategy and is a socially negative behaviour when adults talk to them about the value of honesty and by seeing adults around them being honest.

At what point in life does lying become pathological rather than a "normal" part of childhood?

Lying can become pathological in two senses. One, a person can lie frequently. Lying frequently can cause others to mistrust you and can have serious social consequences on one's interpersonal relationships. When an individual lies so frequently that it starts to affect their social interactions negatively, is repetitive and long-lasting then lying become pathological. Second, lies can be pathological when they are about something that causes extreme harm to oneself and/or another individual. For instance, individuals who pretend to be sick and lie about their health. These lies are not the small day-to-day lies that most people tell. Most children and adults do not lying pathologically. Only a very small percentage develop pathological lying and usually it is related to other problems like conduct disorder, aggression, delinquency, drug abuse, or other negative life events. Pathological lying is often a symptom of a much larger problem. However, it is not very common.

Do you feel that polygraph tests are reliable?

There is a debate about how reliable polygraph tests are. Generally, I feel that they are not reliable enough to be admitted into court as evidence. The problem with the polygraph tests is that they are open to some interpretation and they may make false positives. They measure physiological responses of individuals when answered specific critical questions and compare their responses when

asked control questions. However, an individual who is unduly stressed by the critical question but who is innocent may appear to have a “spike” in their physiological response which is interpreted as guilt. At the moment there is no definitive lie-detector machine or system. Some techniques may catch some liars, but none catch all liars and some catch innocent persons.