



# Featured Research

Centre for Lifespan Development Research

## Dr. Angela Evans

### *How does deception develop in children*

#### **What's the bottom line?**

The next time you see a child telling a lie, don't worry – Dr. Evans' research provides a unique window into children's thinking, showing that lie-telling is actually a marker of mental growth. Parents and individuals who work with children can use Dr. Evans' research to help provide them with an understanding of children's honesty, as well as the best ways to manage and react to it.

#### **What's in a lie – What is this research about?**

Dr. Evans and colleagues have discovered that children may begin to lie as young as two years of age and that within two years lie telling increases. Specifically, Dr. Evans has found that roughly **25% of two-year-olds, 50% of three-year-olds and 80% of four-year-olds told voluntary lies** when asked about something they had done wrong (e.g., peeking at a toy they were told not to). This consistent increase shows that lie-telling should be seen as a normal part of children's development.

Dr. Evans has also examined various types of lies, such as **antisocial lies** (lies told to conceal rule breaking/transgressions), **prosocial lies** (white-lies told to be polite) and **blue-lies** (lies told to benefit a group). Findings show that even young children show these various types of deceptive behaviours.

Dr. Evans' research suggests that lying may be tied to certain parts of development, such as children's thinking. Specifically, Dr. Evans' research has furthered the understanding of how children may strategize when making their lies. Specifically, children must first



judge whether or not they are likely to be caught lying and second need to form their answers to follow-up questions so as to not reveal their lie – these abilities improve with age ...

#### ***Your child might be lying, but it is a good thing!***

Lying may often be thought of as 'bad' behaviour, but Dr. Evans' research has shown that lie-telling is a sign of development! By the age of 3 children have begun to develop two very important thinking strategies – **Theory of Mind** and **Executive Functioning**, each of which relate to their lie-telling.

**Theory of Mind** is the ability to attribute thoughts/beliefs/desires to oneself and others and also understand that others may have differing thoughts/beliefs/desires. With lying, Theory of Mind helps children understand that they can affect others' thoughts/beliefs through lies (e.g., make someone believe something false).

## Brock University



#### **Dr. Evans ...**

is a Developmental Psychologist and Associate Professor at Brock University, where she is the principal investigator of the Social-Cognitive Development Lab in the Psychology Department. Dr. Evans completed her Master's degree at Wilfrid Laurier University, her Ph.D. at the University of Toronto and her Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Southern California.

Specifically, Theory of Mind helps children judge whether or not they should lie in the first place (e.g., did this person see me peek at the toy when I was not supposed to) and helps children understand that they need to be consistent with what they say after lying, so that they do not accidentally reveal their lie (e.g., lying about having not peeked at a toy, but then revealing the toy’s identity).

**Executive Functioning** refers to specific skills that ‘coordinate’ many mental activities. Dr. Evans has found that these skills may help children tell clear lies. Specifically, memory and inhibitory control (i.e., the ability to prevent yourself from responding or behaving in a certain way) may be key to the development of lie–telling behaviours.

**So what – Where is this research being used?**

**Legal System** – Do you promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? This statement may appear minor, but the research of Dr. Evans and her colleagues has demonstrated that the act of **promising to tell the truth** may be more important than checking if a child understands what it means to be ‘moral’, which is sometimes required in order for children and youth to testify. These findings demonstrate that jurisdictions may want to consider removing the moral competency exam from their requirements (as Canada did in 2006 with Bill C–2), as it may prevent capable children and youth from testifying.

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)** – It is often thought that children with ASD do not lie. However Dr. Evans has added to the understanding of this disorder



through showing that children with ASD can lie, but have issues with maintaining these lies and overall tend to be poor liars. This is important for understanding the social issues that youth with ASD may face, as certain aspects of lying are sometimes needed to maintain friendships (e.g., a prosocial lie about liking someone’s new hair cut). If children with ASD have issues with these socially acceptable lies, they may face further issues with friendships.

**Parenting** – Dr. Evans’ most recent research has shown that talking about the positive aspects of honesty, rather than the negative aspects of dishonesty, may be the best way to stop children from lying. Parents may want to use this information in their parenting, through praising the moments when their children tell the truth, rather than punishing dishonesty.

**How do they do it?**

Dr. Evans employs interesting methods:

- Playing a game with children where they are asked not to peek at something (e.g. a toy) and then asking them questions about their actions
- Asking children to recount stories that are both true and false, in order to see the differences between the ways they discuss these stories

**Parents, we need your help!**

Dr. Evans tests children at Brock University and is always looking for new participants! If you are interested in having your child be a part of these studies and learning more about their development, please contact Dr. Evans – [brock.scclab@brocku.ca](mailto:brock.scclab@brocku.ca)

**Want More Information?**

Are you a student, researcher or parent who would like to be involved in Dr. Evans’ work?

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