



Is Honesty Always the Best Policy?

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You probably grew up being taught that honesty is the best policy, but is this statement unequivocally true?

Complete honesty can sometimes cause hurt feelings, such as in the following examples:

- A child has difficulty making friends on the playground because he or she walks away when listening to a story that is not interesting to him/her.
- A child offers his/her honest opinion that another child's hair looked a lot better before a haircut.
- A child opens a gift at a birthday party and tells the gift giver that it is not what he/she wanted.

How should children balance the notion that honesty is the best policy with the other famous adage about complete honesty—that it's brutal?

Not All Lies are Created Equal

When we think about lies, we generally think about "bad" lies. These are the lies that, when discovered, undermine trust. When children purposely lie, their intent is generally to avoid doing undesirable activities or to prevent the consequences of getting caught doing something that is wrong.

However, some lies are told to spare the feelings of another person. According to

Oxforddictionaries.com, a white lie is "a harmless or trivial lie, especially one told to avoid hurting



someone's feelings." In other words, as per the dictionary, it's possible for some lies to be "harmless." Think of how overwhelmingly contrary this definition runs to what most children are taught about lying.

Early Childhood

In fact, lying is a symptom of normal, foundational growth in young children's social development. Around the age of two, children begin to view others as separate beings with separate thoughts and feelings, and they instinctually begin using their newfound understanding to tell lies. For example, a young child might say that they didn't eat a cookie, even though their face is covered with chocolate. Those lies themselves are not intentionally deceptive; at that stage of development, children are unable to logically discern truth from lies—their behaviors are solely emotionally motivated. Returning to the example, the child perceived a parent's expression or tone of voice as disapproving and lied about eating the cookie to avoid that discomfort.

Around the age of seven, children begin to have the ability to recognize that their words can impact the feelings of others. Along with this developmental ability to understand the reciprocal nature of relationships, children become capable of telling lies that are well-intentioned and have the purpose of

sparing someone's feelings. Commonly referred to as "white lies," these untruths are trivial, harmless, and are based on sensitivity toward how the other person might feel if they were told one's true thoughts or feelings. The ability to tell a trivial lie to spare someone from hurt feelings is an indicator of the development of positive social skills.

Prosocial Lies

The ability to know when to use a white lie (herein referred to as a **prosocial lie**) relies on the ability to see situations from another person's perspective. Some children have difficulty predicting the impact that their words or behavior will have on another person. Having been taught the value of being honest, they are concrete and literal in their communication. Children who have weaknesses in social thinking or pragmatic language skills may find it challenging to come up with a prosocial lie "in the moment." According to **Understood.org**, a website with information about learning and attention issues, pragmatics are defined as "the unspoken, subtle rules of spoken language that allow people to connect...the give-and-take of a conversation." The **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA)** further describes pragmatic language, with the following examples of rules for conversations and storytelling:

- Taking turns when you talk.
- Letting others know the topic when you start talking.
- Staying on topic.
- Trying another way of saying what you mean when someone did not understand you.
- Using gestures and body language, like pointing or shrugging.
- Knowing how close to stand to someone when talking.
- Using facial expressions and eye contact.

As a facet of social communication, school age children are expected to know when it is appropriate to tell a prosocial lie to spare someone's feelings.

The Social Fake

An effective technique for showing interest during conversation is the "Social Fake," a concept developed by **Michelle Garcia Winner**, creator of the Social Thinking® Methodology (**socialthinking.com**) and an internationally recognized expert in the study and teaching of social thinking.

Effectively using the social fake involves the ability to interpret a social situation and adjust one's language and behavior to avoid hurting someone's feelings.

The social fake can be a useful strategy when a child is listening to another child talk about something that he/she is not interested in. Actively listening, by maintaining eye contact, nodding and making comments such as "uh huh," "yeah," or "cool," as well as asking follow-up questions, can give the child speaking a feeling of being listened to and cared about—a cornerstone of communication and friendship.

Most of us frequently use the social fake without even being aware of it. For example, let's say that your neighbors are out walking their ferocious-looking pit bull and stop to say, "Look at our new dog; isn't he so cute?" You are thinking that he is not cute and in fact you are afraid of big dogs. You could use the social fake to make a comment that would be positive and leave your neighbors feeling good. Your response might be



"He sure is big, but he looks friendly." This isn't your true thought, but no harm is done, and your neighbors' feelings are spared.

Brutal Honesty

An adult may cringe when a toddler is asked if they like a new shirt that Grandma just gave them and they say that it feels itchy and they hate it, but this response is attributed to a very young child's limited ability to consider the effect of their words on another person's feelings. However, an elementary school-aged child is expected to have a more nuanced response — one that considers Grandma's feelings. For kids who are very concrete, literal thinkers, any answer but the truth is a lie.

Developing healthy friendships can be challenging for children who are not able to tell prosocial lies. For example, kids who have difficulty reading the non-verbal cues in conversation may be unaware that they appear disinterested in a story that a peer is telling. Since other kids may interpret this lack of connection in the conversation as self-centered behavior, teaching kids how to show interest in a conversation (even if they are not very excited by the topic) helps them make and keep friends.

The Art of Empathy

Early in my experience as a group leader helping kids learn reciprocal conversation skills that facilitate connection and the development of friendships, I began asking elementary school and middle school age kids what they thought the purpose of conversation was. Responses were varied and included "getting to know someone," "telling someone a story or how to do something," "helping a person who is hurt," and "asking someone to play with you." I was surprised to hear that many of the kids with weak pragmatic language or weak perspective-taking skills believed that the purpose of communication was solely to impart information or facts. This was an important discovery, because it opened the door for us to discuss how conversation and communication help people connect to each other and show caring and empathy.

Teaching kids how to maintain eye contact in a natural way (without staring), nod their head to indicate listening, make related comments, ask questions, and match the emotion of the speaker helps them develop the perspective-taking skills that are a prerequisite to showing empathy. Kids can generally think of another person (usually an adult) who "gets" how they feel. Once they become aware that they can show other kids that they "get" how those kids feel and that other kids can "get" how the child feels, progress is made toward the kind of communication that builds friendships.

Practicing the Social Fake

Pretending to be interested when one is not may seem awkward initially but tends to get easier as kids practice. Practice can be done in a fun, silly, game-like fashion, where a parent or other child tells an intentionally boring story (for example, about broccoli, a light bulb, or dirt), and the listener is challenged to use the social fake to convincingly appear interested. The success of the social fake is determined by whether the storyteller felt like the listener was paying attention and seemed interested in his/her story.



Another time that the social fake is valuable is when a child opens presents, such as at a birthday party. When the birthday boy or girl takes center stage, surrounded by guests and gifts, it takes savvy social skills to remember to first open and read the card, then unwrap each gift and have an appropriately excited reaction, make a personal comment about what you like about that gift, followed by scanning the crowd for your friend so that you can make a sincere thank you, using your friend's name, while making eye contact. In this writer's experience raising three sons, present-opening time was the most likely time for the festive mood to change to one of impatience, with kids vying to have their gift opened next and the birthday child feeling overwhelmed. It seemed like the kids who had a brief but appreciative reaction to each gift fared the best. Something like, "Cool! Thanks, (name of gift giver)" got the job done. It does not matter if the recipient feels that the gift is for someone younger/not fun/boring, or they already own one, the social fake ensures that all gift givers feel acknowledged.

So, using the social fake is okay, even though it doesn't represent one's true thoughts or feelings. It is a skill that shows that one can understand another person's point of view. Developing healthy friendships requires perspective-taking, the ability to consider others' feelings, and a willingness to adjust your behavior to keep them feeling comfortable rather than upset or uncomfortable.

Teaching a child how to listen and respond in a way that shows acceptance and caring toward another child can have surprising benefits for the listener. This child may find out interesting information from the child who is speaking, and the two may realize that they have common interests. Also, a child who listens empathically is more likely to be listened to when it is their turn to talk. Mastering the social fake helps children get through conversations that they find boring, while building or maintaining a relationship. Conversations can be visualized as a ping pong game, with the participants taking turns talking. Children who learn strategies to keep the game going enjoy greater levels of connection and fun with their peers.