

***Parental Lie Detection Skills:  
Superior or Just Chance?***

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Everybody lies. Period. End of story. There is no inherent gene that makes us incapable of lying. People can lie for small reasons or large, for courtesy or for social graces, or out of self-preservation or prosecution. Deception, lying, and detecting any kind of non-verbal cues that our bodies might use to betray us has become an exhaustive area of research. After all, how profitable could a perfect, flawless lie detection unit be, or even better a skill that could be taught? But are some of these skills and talents of detecting lies engrained in parents? Is it taught or learned? Or are humans even able to detect lies at all, or is it just chance?

Parents might find it particularly necessary to know whether or not a child is lying. While most parents would like to believe their children are angels and incapable of things like that, the truth is very often too quickly learned. Some parents, particularly mothers, believe that they are very good at detecting their children's lies. But are they? Crossman and Lewis (2006) state that children begin to lie as early as three years old. It is often the parent's task to educate a child when lies are appropriate and when they are not. Oftentimes this takes place through mimicry, as children often learn to lie by learning from their parents (Crossman and Lewis, 2006).

I would tend to argue that this may not be the case. Children may inherently learn through trial and error how to lie, and may not need any parental influence at all, much like the belief that children must be taught to hate. Staving off an emotion like hate is similar to trying to prevent a child from lying by avoiding exposure to such an act. Like an emotion boiling to the surface from a wrong committed against a child, logic will often win out over morals when the realization that punishment may be escaped if the child lies. After all, someone somewhere at

sometime had to learn how to lie, and they did so without the previous exposure to such an act from another party. Basically, the first liar.

Since the first lie was told, we've probably been trying to find a way to detect that lie. Myths like that of Native Americans using hot coals on tongues of suspected liars or the infamous myth that liars won't look their target in the eye, have given people hope and confidence that we can detect lies through non verbal cues or biological tells. Paul Ekman has made a career out of finding such cues. But do such cues exist? Are there natural lie detectors, or can people be taught to detect lies?

Laura Spinney (2011) says there are no non-verbal cues that will always under every circumstance give away a lie. Several studies have been conducted under strict laboratory and facility conditions and the results have often settled in between chance and slightly better than chance among those without training. Spinney explains that the mere act of being "grilled" can create nervousness that needs to be expelled, and that nervousness is often expelled through the same channels as a liar would expel their nervous energy. Additionally, once these 'tells' have made it into popular culture, such as the myth that a liar will not look you in the eyes, then liars will then know to change their behavior when lying (2011).

When it comes to lying among children, the question is raised as to whether or not a child is as good of a liar as an adult with more practice. Crossman and Lewis tested children's ability to lie by placing certain children in a room with a two way mirror and told the children not to look at the toy that was behind them. The researcher then left the room. The following moments were captured on videotape and the researcher soon returned to the room. The children were then asked if they had peeked. The videotape was the edited to remove the moments that the

researcher was out of the room, then the tape was played to a group of subjects. The subjects were asked to gauge the child's response as to whether or not they were lying. Most of those responses were less than that of chance falling in at around 48% accuracy. Many of these subjects believed the child was lying when in fact, they were not. Interestingly enough, those who worked with children on a regular basis scored slightly better than chance (Crossman and Lewis, 2006).

During the explanation of this research, I found quite an oddity among the description of the research. The research paper explains two scenarios. First, the child peeked and lied about having peeked, by saying, "No." Second, the child did not peek and told the truth when they said, "No." Of all of the children that put in this project, there was no mention of a single one having peeked and then told the truth about peeking by saying, "Yes." If this was not an omission and this was in fact the way it actually occurred, it would be interesting to delve into the reasoning behind this. Could this mean that children are incapable of self-incriminating themselves? Little omissions such as this could cause several questions to be raised, but if accurate, could have raised an interesting question that needs additional study.

The fact that those subjects who worked with children on a regular basis were able to detect children's honesty or lack thereof slightly better than those who did not have as much exposure to children, raises the question of familiarity in lie detection. Most studies show that a familiarity with the potential liar can increase the success of spotting a lie. Lee and Welker (2011) explain that in order for a person to detect a lie, they must be able to detect "behavioral anomalies" that occur during a lie. However, in order to spot these anomalies, the lie detector must find a baseline to judge the suspected liar by. Through familiarity of a person's normal

behavior, another person could more easily detect changes or oddities that could lead to potential dishonesty. This research were tend to lean towards the likelihood that parents, since they have more exposure to their children, could possibly be more likely to spot lies than others.

This may not be as simple as that, though. Using examples such as the Scott Peterson case in which the parent's of Lacy Peterson supported Scott in the earliest days of the murder investigation, which later proved to be misplaced support, Fischer and Kennison (2007) explain that it is generally accepted among the media and public that families are better at detecting lies, but are in fact, never as good at detecting lies as they are telling them. A basic "truth bias" can often be created among family members, causing family members to defend their children or loved ones. It often takes numerous incidents of dishonesty for the family member to accept that the family member is capable of such deceit. Again, using the example of the Peterson's, it took the evidence of an extra-marital affair for the family to repeal their support of Scott Peterson (Fischer and Kennison, 2007).

Fischer and Kennison continue their research through a two step process, the first a questionnaire that asks people to judge their own lie detection skills. The second part of the study then puts those opinions to the test. Those in the study were asked to bring a friend and were then asked to detect their lies. As a result of the trials, Fischer and Kennison decided that these friends were able to gain better accuracy the longer they knew each other. Again, we find the interesting commonality of experience in gaining a baseline for deception. Going beyond the friendship of those in this study, parents reside with the child and watch them evolve, grow up, and become thinking individuals. This experience could be enough to make them superior lie detectors.

But is it merely experience, or is there training that can be involved? Spinney (2011) explains that when law enforcement or intelligence agencies put their agents through interrogation training for lie detection, their ability to detect lies increases from 50%, just about chance, to upwards of 70%. This, of course, is still not certainty, but it is enough of an increase to show a causal relationship with the training (2011). Fischer and Kennison also found an increase in accuracy among trained officers of the Central Intelligence Agency with scores topping off at 67% (2007). Their research seems to support these numbers within the study.

These numbers, while greater than chance, still don't seem very high. Deception researcher Paul Ekman continues to defend his detection studies. His defense is the first concern I had regarding these official studies. We can, of course, perform these studies on subjects and ask them to lie. However, there is no punishment or negative result if they are caught in the lie. There is no real possibility of loss, therefore the body will not react anywhere near the same way it would if it were under serious pressure. Therefore any and all of these studies which test lie detection skills in a laboratory, away from real world circumstances and punishments, need to be taken with a grain of salt and understood that there is a major factor missing from the study's scenarios. This factor could cause the results to be completely irrelevant (Spinney, 2011).

Detecting the lie can often result in how much the liar cares about being caught. If there is no concern from the liar about being caught, it could be much more difficult in detecting the lie. Sociopaths are usually such good liars because they have a lack of a moral structure and therefore have no concern about being discovered in a lie. Most children, however, do care about being found out. As they grow up, their lies begin to increase in number. Bristol and Mangleburg (2005) suggest that it is an attempt to gain greater independence from their parents.

These feelings begin to surface in mid-to-late teen years. It is often these ages that could have the greatest consequences of actions, so being able to catch children in lies at this age would be greatly beneficial to parents. The study showed that more than 92% of teenagers in high school lied the year of the study. These children were less often trying to hide something out of guilt, but were more often simply seeking independence and space from their parents. They desired something that their parents did not know about (2005).

Are all families as equally at risk of having dishonest children? Bristol and Mangleburg believed so. They originally postulated that protective families would be more likely to have these dynamic of children more likely to lie. However, their research showed that it was in fact authoritarian households that had the greatest number of children who lied more easily and frequently. These results seemed to make an appropriate amount of sense. While protective families may have made the teenager try to gain more independence, these households reward submissive and obedient behavior.

This research has all made very similar conclusions, yet still have all the same or similar flaws. It could easily be agreed that no one has an inherent or natural ability to detect lies. Experience, practice and exposure to the subject can often increase the likelihood of detecting lies, which is why it could be assumed that parents are often much better lie detectors of their children. It is curious that most often mothers are assumed to be the more accurate lie detector. Continued research could be done to probe the possible reasons for this, though the obvious answer could simply be that the mother is often the one who spends the most time with the children. Despite these perceived abilities at lie detection, without specific training in lie detection or a depth of experience and familiarity with the subject, lie detection often comes in at

around chance levels. While only a few studies have been done specifically on parents, familiarity has continued to come up as a major factor in the ability to detect lies. Familiarity with normal and natural behaviors can often times not be matched by the familiarity a parent has with their children. It may not be natural or engrained in parents to detect their children lies, but their experience and time spent with the child certainly can be seen as a reason that parents can detect their children's lies at higher than chance percentages.

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