

Of course the Tooth Fairy's real: How parents lie in the US and China

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Almost everyone teaches their children that lying is always wrong. But the vast majority of parents lie to their children in order to get them to behave, according to new research published in the *International Journal of Psychology*.

The study by Gail Heyman of the University of California-San Diego and her colleagues found certain variations but generally similar trends in the way parents from the US and China use the slippery concept of 'truth' to their advantage:

The percentage of parents who reported lying to their [children](#) for the purpose of getting them to behave appropriately was higher in China (98%) than in the U.S. (84%), but rates for other types of lies were similar between the two countries. A possible explanation for this difference is that Chinese parents are more likely than in the U.S. to demand compliance from their kids, and will go to greater lengths to make it happen.

Both Chinese and American parents seem to be comfortable lying to their children in order to promote [positive feelings](#), and to support [belief](#) in the existence of fantasy characters like the Tooth Fairy.

Parents in both countries reported telling lies about a wide range of similar topics, including ones designed to influence their children's [eating habits](#), or to dissuade children's pleas for toys or treats when shopping!

Certain specific lies are extremely common among parents in both countries, such as a false threat to abandon a child who refuses to follow the parent while away from home.

There are good reasons however to be cautious about lying to children. Previous studies have shown that when young children are deciding whom to trust they are sensitive to people's history of being honest or dishonest with them personally,

so when parents lie to their children it may undermine the child's sense of trust.

These findings suggest parents should choose their battles wisely: is it really that important for them to finish all their peas? Alternative ways to encourage children to behave – such as a system of rewards – might have less risk of confusing them with conflicting ideas about honesty. Above all this study shows the need to stimulate debate about the acceptability of [lying](#) under different circumstances, and how children should be best raised to understand the value of honesty.

More information: Gail D. Heyman , Anna S. Hsu , Genyue Fu & Kang Lee (2012). Instrumental lying by parents in the US and China, *International Journal of Psychology*, DOI:10.1080/00207594.2012.746463 . www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00207594.2012.746463

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