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## Influence of social factors on the relation between lie-telling and children's cognitive abilities



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### ABSTRACT

Lie-telling may be part of a normative developmental process for children. However, little is known about the complex interaction of social and cognitive factors related to this developmental behavior. The current study examined parenting style, maternal exposure to stressors, and children's cognitive abilities in relation to children's antisocial lie-telling behavior in an experimental setting. Children (3–6 years,  $N = 157$ ) participated in a modified temptation resistance paradigm to elicit spontaneous lies. Results indicate that high authoritative parenting and high inhibitory control interact to predict a lower propensity to lie, but those who did lie had better semantic leakage control. This suggests that although children's lie-telling may be normative during early development, the relation to children's cognitive abilities can be moderated by responsive parenting behaviors that discourage lying.

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### Introduction

Lying is universally regarded as an antisocial behavior (Bok, 1978). However, at the same time, it is still a common behavior among adults that is used as a social strategy to manage interpersonal relationships (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Research with children has found that lie-telling emerges during

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the preschool years as a function of normative cognitive development (e.g., Talwar & Crossman, 2011), particularly executive functioning (EF) skills (e.g., Evans & Lee, 2011, 2013; Polak & Harris, 1999; Talwar & Lee, 2002; Talwar & Lee, 2011; Xu & Lee, 2007). Although researchers have explored the role of cognitive factors, very little research has examined direct and indirect social–environmental influences on the development of deception. Yet, lying is an interpersonal exercise that is likely shaped by social and environmental factors. Moreover, social environments affect the development of cognitive abilities (e.g., Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007; Morrell & Murray, 2003; Talwar, Carlson, & Lee, 2011), raising the possibility that social and environmental factors moderate the association between cognitive abilities and lie-telling. Even though their impact has been highlighted as significant (e.g., DePaulo & Jordan, 1992; Talwar & Crossman, 2011), how social–environmental and cognitive factors concurrently influence children's lie-telling is poorly understood. The current study examined how social and environmental factors, specifically parenting styles and maternal stress, interact with cognitive abilities to predict children's lie-telling to conceal a transgression.

### *Lying and social factors*

Both research and theory suggest that a central social–environmental influence in children's lives is their parents because parenting plays a critical role in children's development. Sensitive parenting is associated with more optimal cognitive, behavioral, and socioemotional child outcomes (e.g., Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb, 2004) and with the higher internalization of regulatory strategies (Bernier, Carlson, Deschenes, & Matte-Gagne, 2012). However, parenting that is harsh and inconsistent is correlated with less optimal development. For instance, authoritarian parental discipline (i.e., harsh, power assertive) is associated with poorer social–cognitive performance (Hughes, Deater-Deckard, & Cutting, 1999; Pears & Moses, 2003; Ruffman, Perner, & Parkin, 1999). In a meta-analysis, Karreman, van Tuijl, van Aken, and Deković (2006) found that positive parental control was associated with children's effective self-regulation, whereas negative parental control was associated with poor self-regulation. Thus, it is possible that regulatory capacities may be improved through authoritative behavioral control or undermined by authoritarian control (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009).

From a theoretical standpoint, Grusec and Davidov (2010) theorized that parenting influences child development in domain-specific ways. The control domain involves parental discipline that is intended to instill self-control in children, and children's moral behavior is posited to be an outcome of this domain. Hence, control strategies in particular (e.g., parenting approaches and responses) are thought to influence children's lie-telling as an aspect of moral development. The amount of parent control used must be sufficient to produce the desired behavior but not so forceful that it undermines internalization (Bugental & Grusec, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 1985) or reduces opportunities for children to learn about others' perspectives (Pears & Moses, 2003). Thus, firm but responsive parenting (i.e., authoritative parenting) may facilitate children's development of self-control (EF) strategies as well as the socially accepted moral behavior of truth-telling (or context-appropriate prosocial lie-telling; e.g., Popliger, Talwar, & Crossman, 2011; see also Talwar & Crossman, 2011).

To date, however, there is sparse research on the relation between social–environmental factors, particularly parenting, and children's lie-telling behavior. In examining children's lie-telling in school contexts, Talwar and Lee (2011) found that children studying in comparatively punitive, authoritarian school environments lied earlier and more effectively than did children studying in less harsh school environments. Power-assertive discipline and corporal punishment have also been associated with children being rated as less trustworthy (Rotenberg, Betts, Eisner, & Ribeaud, 2012), having decreased resistance to temptation (Lepper, 1973), higher rates of antisocial behavior (Gershoff, 2002; Lansford et al., 2009) and poorer conscience development during early childhood (Kochanska & Aksan, 2006; Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002). Furthermore, one study of the prevalence of boys' reported lies found a positive association with maternal rejection (Stouthamer-Loeber & Loeber, 1986). In contrast, 3-year-old Chinese children whose parents used more controlling parenting methods were less likely to lie to an experimenter to cover a transgression (Ma, Xu, Evans, Liu, & Luo, 2015). Yet, the general trend has been that authoritarian parenting tends to be associated with more problem behavior and lie-telling among children.

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