

Lies We Tell Kids

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Adults lie constantly to kids. I'm not saying we should stop, but I think we should at least examine which lies we tell and why.

There may also be a benefit to us. We were all lied to as kids, and some of the lies we were told still affect us. So by studying the ways adults lie to kids, we may be able to clear our heads of lies we were told.

I'm using the word "lie" in a very general sense: not just overt falsehoods, but also all the more subtle ways we mislead kids. Though "lie" has negative connotations, I don't mean to suggest we should never do this—just that we should pay attention when we do.

[1]

One of the most remarkable things about the way we lie to kids is how broad the conspiracy is. All adults know what their culture lies to kids about: they're the questions you answer "Ask your parents." If a kid asked who won the World Series in 1982 or what the atomic weight of carbon was, you could just tell him. But if a kid asks you "Is there a God?" or "What's a prostitute?" you'll probably say "Ask your parents."

Since we all agree, kids see few cracks in the view of the world presented to them. The biggest disagreements are between parents and schools, but even those are small. Schools are careful what they say about controversial topics, and if they do contradict what parents want their kids to believe, parents either pressure the school into keeping quiet or move their kids to a new school.

The conspiracy is so thorough that most kids who discover it do so only by discovering internal contradictions in what they're told. It can be traumatic for the ones who wake up during the operation. Here's what happened to Einstein:

Through the reading of popular scientific books I soon reached the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic freethinking coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being deceived by the state through lies: it was a crushing impression.

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I remember that feeling. By 15 I was convinced the world was corrupt from end to end. That's why movies like The Matrix have such resonance. Every kid grows up in a fake world. In a way it would be easier if the forces behind it were as clearly differentiated as a bunch of evil machines, and one could make a clean break just by taking a pill.

Protection

If you ask adults why they lie to kids, the most common reason they give is to protect them. And kids do need protecting. The environment you want to create for a newborn child will be quite unlike the streets of a big city.

That seems so obvious it seems wrong to call it a lie. It's certainly not a bad lie to tell, to give a baby the impression the world is quiet and warm and safe. But this harmless type of lie can turn sour if left unexamined.

Imagine if you tried to keep someone in as protected an environment as a newborn till age 18. To mislead someone so grossly about the world would seem not protection but abuse. That's an extreme example, of course; when parents do that sort of thing it becomes national news. But you see the same problem on a smaller scale in the malaise teenagers feel in suburbia.

The main purpose of suburbia is to provide a protected environment for children to grow up in. And it seems great for 10 year olds. I liked living in suburbia when I was 10. I didn't notice how sterile it was. My whole world was no bigger than a few friends'

houses I bicycled to and some woods I ran around in. On a log scale I was midway between crib and globe. A suburban street was just the right size. But as I grew older, suburbia started to feel suffocatingly fake.

Life can be pretty good at 10 or 20, but it's often frustrating at 15. This is too big a problem to solve here, but certainly one reason life sucks at 15 is that kids are trapped in a world designed for 10 year olds.

What do parents hope to protect their children from by raising them in suburbia? A friend who moved out of Manhattan said merely that her 3 year old daughter "saw too much." Off the top of my head, that might include: people who are high or drunk, poverty, madness, gruesome medical conditions, sexual behavior of various degrees of oddness, and violent anger.

I think it's the anger that would worry me most if I had a 3 year old. I was 29 when I moved to New York and I was surprised even then. I wouldn't want a 3 year old to see some of the disputes I saw. It would be too frightening. A lot of the things adults conceal from smaller children, they conceal because they'd be frightening, not because they want to conceal the existence of such things. Misleading the child is just a byproduct.

This seems one of the most justifiable types of lying adults do to kids. But because the lies are indirect we don't keep a very strict accounting of them. Parents know they've concealed the facts about sex, and many at some point sit their kids down and explain more. But few tell their kids about the differences between the real world and the cocoon they grew up in. Combine this with the confidence parents try to instill in their kids, and every year you get a new crop of 18 year olds who think they know how to run the world.

Don't all 18 year olds think they know how to run the world? Actually this seems to be a recent innovation, no more than about 100 years old. In preindustrial times teenage kids were junior members of the adult world and comparatively well aware of their shortcomings. They could see they weren't as strong or skillful as the village smith. In past times people lied to kids about some things more than we

do now, but the lies implicit in an artificial, protected environment are a recent invention. Like a lot of new inventions, the rich got this first. Children of kings and great magnates were the first to grow up out of touch with the world. Suburbia means half the population can live like kings in that respect.

Sex (and Drugs)

I'd have different worries about raising teenage kids in New York. I'd worry less about what they'd see, and more about what they'd do. I went to college with a lot of kids who grew up in Manhattan, and as a rule they seemed pretty jaded. They seemed to have lost their virginity at an average of about 14 and by college had tried more drugs than I'd even heard of.

The reasons parents don't want their teenage kids having sex are complex. There are some obvious dangers: pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. But those aren't the only reasons parents don't want their kids having sex. The average parents of a 14 year old girl would hate the idea of her having sex even if there were zero risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.

Kids can probably sense they aren't being told the whole story. After all, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are just as much a problem for adults, and they have sex.

What really bothers parents about their teenage kids having sex? Their dislike of the idea is so visceral it's probably inborn. But if it's inborn it should be universal, and there are plenty of societies where parents don't mind if their teenage kids have sex—indeed, where it's normal for 14 year olds to become mothers. So what's going on? There does seem to be a universal taboo against sex with prepubescent children. One can imagine evolutionary reasons for that. And I think this is the main reason parents in industrialized societies dislike teenage kids having sex. They still think of them as children, even though biologically they're not, so the taboo against child sex still has force.

One thing adults conceal about sex they also conceal about drugs: that it can cause great pleasure. That's what makes sex and drugs

so dangerous. The desire for them can cloud one's judgement—which is especially frightening when the judgement being clouded is the already wretched judgement of a teenage kid.

Here parents' desires conflict. Older societies told kids they had bad judgement, but modern parents want their children to be confident. This may well be a better plan than the old one of putting them in their place, but it has the side effect that after having implicitly lied to kids about how good their judgement is, we then have to lie again about all the things they might get into trouble with if they believed us.

If parents told their kids the truth about sex and drugs, it would be: the reason you should avoid these things is that you have lousy judgement. People with twice your experience still get burned by them. But this may be one of those cases where the truth wouldn't be convincing, because one of the symptoms of bad judgement is believing you have good judgement. When you're too weak to lift something, you can tell, but when you're making a decision impetuously, you're all the more sure of it.

Innocence

Another reason parents don't want their kids having sex is that they want to keep them innocent. Adults have a certain model of how kids are supposed to behave, and it's different from what they expect of other adults.

One of the most obvious differences is the words kids are allowed to use. Most parents use words when talking to other adults that they wouldn't want their kids using. They try to hide even the existence of these words for as long as they can. And this is another of those conspiracies everyone participates in: everyone knows you're not supposed to swear in front of kids.

I've never heard more different explanations for anything parents tell kids than why they shouldn't swear. Every parent I know forbids their children to swear, and yet no two of them have the same justification. It's clear most start with not wanting kids to swear, then make up the reason afterward.

So my theory about what's going on is that the function of swearwords is to mark the speaker as an adult. There's no difference in the meaning of "shit" and "poopoo." So why should one be ok for kids to say and one forbidden? The only explanation is: by definition. [3]

Why does it bother adults so much when kids do things reserved for adults? The idea of a foul-mouthed, cynical 10 year old leaning against a lamppost with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth is very disconcerting. But why?

One reason we want kids to be innocent is that we're programmed to like certain kinds of helplessness. I've several times heard mothers say they deliberately refrained from correcting their young children's mispronunciations because they were so cute. And if you think about it, cuteness is helplessness. Toys and cartoon characters meant to be cute always have clueless expressions and stubby, ineffectual limbs.

It's not surprising we'd have an inborn desire to love and protect helpless creatures, considering human offspring are so helpless for so long. Without the helplessness that makes kids cute, they'd be very annoying. They'd merely seem like incompetent adults. But there's more to it than that. The reason our hypothetical jaded 10 year old bothers me so much is not just that he'd be annoying, but that he'd have cut off his prospects for growth so early. To be jaded you have to think you know how the world works, and any theory a 10 year old had about that would probably be a pretty narrow one.

Innocence is also open-mindedness. We want kids to be innocent so they can continue to learn. Paradoxical as it sounds, there are some kinds of knowledge that get in the way of other kinds of knowledge. If you're going to learn that the world is a brutal place full of people trying to take advantage of one another, you're better off learning it last. Otherwise you won't bother learning much more.

Very smart adults often seem unusually innocent, and I don't think

this is a coincidence. I think they've deliberately avoided learning about certain things. Certainly I do. I used to think I wanted to know everything. Now I know I don't.

Death

After sex, death is the topic adults lie most conspicuously about to kids. Sex I believe they conceal because of deep taboos. But why do we conceal death from kids? Probably because small children are particularly horrified by it. They want to feel safe, and death is the ultimate threat.

One of the most spectacular lies our parents told us was about the death of our first cat. Over the years, as we asked for more details, they were compelled to invent more, so the story grew quite elaborate. The cat had died at the vet's office. Of what? Of the anaesthesia itself. Why was the cat at the vet's office? To be fixed. And why had such a routine operation killed it? It wasn't the vet's fault; the cat had a congenitally weak heart; the anaesthesia was too much for it; but there was no way anyone could have known this in advance. It was not till we were in our twenties that the truth came out: my sister, then about three, had accidentally stepped on the cat and broken its back.

They didn't feel the need to tell us the cat was now happily in cat heaven. My parents never claimed that people or animals who died had "gone to a better place," or that we'd meet them again. It didn't seem to harm us.

My grandmother told us an edited version of the death of my grandfather. She said they'd been sitting reading one day, and when she said something to him, he didn't answer. He seemed to be asleep, but when she tried to rouse him, she couldn't. "He was gone." Having a heart attack sounded like falling asleep. Later I learned it hadn't been so neat, and the heart attack had taken most of a day to kill him.

Along with such outright lies, there must have been a lot of changing the subject when death came up. I can't remember that, of course, but I can infer it from the fact that I didn't really grasp I was

going to die till I was about 19. How could I have missed something so obvious for so long? Now that I've seen parents managing the subject, I can see how: questions about death are gently but firmly turned aside.

On this topic, especially, they're met half-way by kids. Kids often want to be lied to. They want to believe they're living in a comfortable, safe world as much as their parents want them to believe it.

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Identity

Some parents feel a strong adherence to an ethnic or religious group and want their kids to feel it too. This usually requires two different kinds of lying: the first is to tell the child that he or she is an X, and the second is whatever specific lies Xes differentiate themselves by believing.

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Telling a child they have a particular ethnic or religious identity is one of the stickiest things you can tell them. Almost anything else you tell a kid, they can change their mind about later when they start to think for themselves. But if you tell a kid they're a member of a certain group, that seems nearly impossible to shake.

This despite the fact that it can be one of the most premeditated lies parents tell. When parents are of different religions, they'll often agree between themselves that their children will be "raised as Xes." And it works. The kids obligingly grow up considering themselves as Xes, despite the fact that if their parents had chosen the other way, they'd have grown up considering themselves as Ys.

One reason this works so well is the second kind of lie involved. The truth is common property. You can't distinguish your group by doing things that are rational, and believing things that are true. If you want to set yourself apart from other people, you have to do things that are arbitrary, and believe things that are false. And after having spent their whole lives doing things that are arbitrary and believing things that are false, and being regarded as odd by

"outsiders" on that account, the cognitive dissonance pushing children to regard themselves as Xes must be enormous. If they aren't an X, why are they attached to all these arbitrary beliefs and customs? If they aren't an X, why do all the non-Xes call them one?

This form of lie is not without its uses. You can use it to carry a payload of beneficial beliefs, and they will also become part of the child's identity. You can tell the child that in addition to never wearing the color yellow, believing the world was created by a giant rabbit, and always snapping their fingers before eating fish, Xes are also particularly honest and industrious. Then X children will grow up feeling it's part of their identity to be honest and industrious.

This probably accounts for a lot of the spread of modern religions, and explains why their doctrines are a combination of the useful and the bizarre. The bizarre half is what makes the religion stick, and the useful half is the payload.

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Authority

One of the least excusable reasons adults lie to kids is to maintain power over them. Sometimes these lies are truly sinister, like a child molester telling his victims they'll get in trouble if they tell anyone what happened to them. Others seem more innocent; it depends how badly adults lie to maintain their power, and what they use it for.

Most adults make some effort to conceal their flaws from children. Usually their motives are mixed. For example, a father who has an affair generally conceals it from his children. His motive is partly that it would worry them, partly that this would introduce the topic of sex, and partly (a larger part than he would admit) that he doesn't want to tarnish himself in their eyes.

If you want to learn what lies are told to kids, read almost any book written to teach them about "issues."

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Peter Mayle wrote

one called *Why Are We Getting a Divorce?* It begins with the three most important things to remember about divorce, one of which is:

You shouldn't put the blame on one parent, because divorce is never only one person's fault.

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Really? When a man runs off with his secretary, is it always partly his wife's fault? But I can see why Mayle might have said this.

Maybe it's more important for kids to respect their parents than to know the truth about them.

But because adults conceal their flaws, and at the same time insist on high standards of behavior for kids, a lot of kids grow up feeling they fall hopelessly short. They walk around feeling horribly evil for having used a swearword, while in fact most of the adults around them are doing much worse things.

This happens in intellectual as well as moral questions. The more confident people are, the more willing they seem to be to answer a question "I don't know." Less confident people feel they have to have an answer or they'll look bad. My parents were pretty good about admitting when they didn't know things, but I must have been told a lot of lies of this type by teachers, because I rarely heard a teacher say "I don't know" till I got to college. I remember because it was so surprising to hear someone say that in front of a class.

The first hint I had that teachers weren't omniscient came in sixth grade, after my father contradicted something I'd learned in school. When I protested that the teacher had said the opposite, my father replied that the guy had no idea what he was talking about—that he was just an elementary school teacher, after all.

Just a teacher? The phrase seemed almost grammatically ill-formed. Didn't teachers know everything about the subjects they taught? And if not, why were they the ones teaching us?

The sad fact is, US public school teachers don't generally understand the stuff they're teaching very well. There are some sterling exceptions, but as a rule people planning to go into teaching rank

academically near the bottom of the college population. So the fact that I still thought at age 11 that teachers were infallible shows what a job the system must have done on my brain.

School

What kids get taught in school is a complex mix of lies. The most excusable are those told to simplify ideas to make them easy to learn. The problem is, a lot of propaganda gets slipped into the curriculum in the name of simplification.

Public school textbooks represent a compromise between what various powerful groups want kids to be told. The lies are rarely overt. Usually they consist either of omissions or of over-emphasizing certain topics at the expense of others. The view of history we got in elementary school was a crude hagiography, with at least one representative of each powerful group.

The famous scientists I remember were Einstein, Marie Curie, and George Washington Carver. Einstein was a big deal because his work led to the atom bomb. Marie Curie was involved with X-rays. But I was mystified about Carver. He seemed to have done stuff with peanuts.

It's obvious now that he was on the list because he was black (and for that matter that Marie Curie was on it because she was a woman), but as a kid I was confused for years about him. I wonder if it wouldn't have been better just to tell us the truth: that there weren't any famous black scientists. Ranking George Washington Carver with Einstein misled us not only about science, but about the obstacles blacks faced in his time.

As subjects got softer, the lies got more frequent. By the time you got to politics and recent history, what we were taught was pretty much pure propaganda. For example, we were taught to regard political leaders as saints—especially the recently martyred Kennedy and King. It was astonishing to learn later that they'd both been serial womanizers, and that Kennedy was a speed freak to boot. (By the time King's plagiarism emerged, I'd lost the ability to be surprised by the misdeeds of famous people.)

I doubt you could teach kids recent history without teaching them lies, because practically everyone who has anything to say about it has some kind of spin to put on it. Much recent history consists of spin. It would probably be better just to teach them metafacts like that.

Probably the biggest lie told in schools, though, is that the way to succeed is through following "the rules." In fact most such rules are just hacks to manage large groups efficiently.

Peace

Of all the reasons we lie to kids, the most powerful is probably the same mundane reason they lie to us.

Often when we lie to people it's not part of any conscious strategy, but because they'd react violently to the truth. Kids, almost by definition, lack self-control. They react violently to things—and so they get lied to a lot.

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A few Thanksgivings ago, a friend of mine found himself in a situation that perfectly illustrates the complex motives we have when we lie to kids. As the roast turkey appeared on the table, his alarmingly perceptive 5 year old son suddenly asked if the turkey had wanted to die. Foreseeing disaster, my friend and his wife rapidly improvised: yes, the turkey had wanted to die, and in fact had lived its whole life with the aim of being their Thanksgiving dinner. And that (phew) was the end of that.

Whenever we lie to kids to protect them, we're usually also lying to keep the peace.

One consequence of this sort of calming lie is that we grow up thinking horrible things are normal. It's hard for us to feel a sense of urgency as adults over something we've literally been trained not to worry about. When I was about 10 I saw a documentary on pollution that put me into a panic. It seemed the planet was being irretrievably ruined. I went to my mother afterward to ask

if this was so. I don't remember what she said, but she made me feel better, so I stopped worrying about it.

That was probably the best way to handle a frightened 10 year old. But we should understand the price. This sort of lie is one of the main reasons bad things persist: we're all trained to ignore them.

Detox

A sprinter in a race almost immediately enters a state called "oxygen debt." His body switches to an emergency source of energy that's faster than regular aerobic respiration. But this process builds up waste products that ultimately require extra oxygen to break down, so at the end of the race he has to stop and pant for a while to recover.

We arrive at adulthood with a kind of truth debt. We were told a lot of lies to get us (and our parents) through our childhood. Some may have been necessary. Some probably weren't. But we all arrive at adulthood with heads full of lies.

There's never a point where the adults sit you down and explain all the lies they told you. They've forgotten most of them. So if you're going to clear these lies out of your head, you're going to have to do it yourself.

Few do. Most people go through life with bits of packing material adhering to their minds and never know it. You probably never can completely undo the effects of lies you were told as a kid, but it's worth trying. I've found that whenever I've been able to undo a lie I was told, a lot of other things fell into place.

Fortunately, once you arrive at adulthood you get a valuable new resource you can use to figure out what lies you were told. You're now one of the liars. You get to watch behind the scenes as adults spin the world for the next generation of kids.

The first step in clearing your head is to realize how far you are from a neutral observer. When I left high school I was, I thought, a complete skeptic. I'd realized high school was crap. I thought

I was ready to question everything I knew. But among the many other things I was ignorant of was how much debris there already was in my head. It's not enough to consider your mind a blank slate. You have to consciously erase it.

Notes

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One reason I stuck with such a brutally simple word is that the lies we tell kids are probably not quite as harmless as we think. If you look at what adults told children in the past, it's shocking how much they lied to them. Like us, they did it with the best intentions. So if we think we're as open as one could reasonably be with children, we're probably fooling ourselves. Odds are people in 100 years will be as shocked at some of the lies we tell as we are at some of the lies people told 100 years ago.

I can't predict which these will be, and I don't want to write an essay that will seem dumb in 100 years. So instead of using special euphemisms for lies that seem excusable according to present fashions, I'm just going to call all our lies lies.

(I have omitted one type: lies told to play games with kids' credulity. These range from "make-believe," which is not really a lie because it's told with a wink, to the frightening lies told by older siblings. There's not much to say about these: I wouldn't want the first type to go away, and wouldn't expect the second type to.)

[2]

Calaprice, Alice (ed.), *The Quotable Einstein*, Princeton University Press, 1996.

[3]

If you ask parents why kids shouldn't swear, the less educated ones usually reply with some question-begging answer like "it's

inappropriate," while the more educated ones come up with elaborate rationalizations. In fact the less educated parents seem closer to the truth.

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As a friend with small children pointed out, it's easy for small children to consider themselves immortal, because time seems to pass so slowly for them. To a 3 year old, a day feels like a month might to an adult. So 80 years sounds to him like 2400 years would to us.

[5]

I realize I'm going to get endless grief for classifying religion as a type of lie. Usually people skirt that issue with some equivocation implying that lies believed for a sufficiently long time by sufficiently large numbers of people are immune to the usual standards for truth. But because I can't predict which lies future generations will consider inexcusable, I can't safely omit any type we tell. Yes, it seems unlikely that religion will be out of fashion in 100 years, but no more unlikely than it would have seemed to someone in 1880 that schoolchildren in 1980 would be taught that masturbation was perfectly normal and not to feel guilty about it.

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Unfortunately the payload can consist of bad customs as well as good ones. For example, there are certain qualities that some groups in America consider "acting white." In fact most of them could as accurately be called "acting Japanese." There's nothing specifically white about such customs. They're common to all cultures with long traditions of living in cities. So it is probably a losing bet for a group to consider behaving the opposite way as part of its identity.

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In this context, "issues" basically means "things we're going to lie to them about." That's why there's a special name for these topics.

[8]

Mayle, Peter, *Why Are We Getting a Divorce?*, Harmony, 1988.

[9]

The ironic thing is, this is also the main reason kids lie to adults. If you freak out when people tell you alarming things, they won't tell you them. Teenagers don't tell their parents what happened that night they were supposed to be staying at a friend's house for the same reason parents don't tell 5 year olds the truth about the Thanksgiving turkey. They'd freak if they knew.

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