

By Helen Branswell, Medical Reporter, The Canadian Press

TORONTO - Virtually everyone does it - offering flattering little half-truths and exaggerations that grease social interactions. The practice is so pervasive we even have a special name for these innocent utterings - white lies.

But when in life does the habit of flattering others start? A new study suggests early - probably earlier than you would think.

The work, a collaboration between experts at the University of Toronto and Zhejiang Normal University in China, pinpoints the age of four as a time when children make the transition from blunt truth tellers to beings who will deliberately choose to overlook reality in order to please a listener.

"If you are not thinking ahead, then you don't have to give them any kind of flattery, just like three year olds have done, you know? They just tell you what they see as what it is," says senior author Kang Lee, a specialist in developmental psychology at the University of Toronto's Institute of Child Study.

"Because these are strangers - you really shouldn't care about them. But the four-, five-year-olds in particular and six-year-olds do care about this kind of stuff."

Lee and co-author Genyue Fu tested children in preschools in China, asking them to grade drawings in the presence of an observer.

After they had assessed the artwork, another person would enter the room, spot a picture and claim to have drawn it. The person would then ask the child what grade he or she would give the work.

Three-year-olds were largely consistent, repeating their original assessment regardless of whether or not the mark was desirable. But by age four, children started to dissemble, upping the grade when asked by the supposed artist.

The researchers tested a bunch of scenarios, showing that once children started to exercise flattering behaviour, they would do it to adults and children, strangers and friends. But there was a hierarchy, with children showing a tendency to be most flattering to those familiar to them and to the adults, Lee says.

Dr. Pratrikha Reebye, a clinical professor with University of British Columbia's department of psychiatry, wasn't familiar with Lee's study and did not want to comment directly on its findings.

But she concurs that at age four, a lot is happening, developmentally. Children are learning to manage their emotions better and regulate their activities more, she says.

The flattery finding fits with research Lee has been doing studying lying in children. That work shows that four is also the age children start to understand it's not necessary or desirable to always tell the truth - especially if they've done something bad.

Three-year-olds are the most honest of children, he says. "And then as soon as you get to four years of age, most of the kids become dishonest. So there is a dramatic shift from three being honest to four years being not very honest."

While that evokes images of innocence lost, Lee insists it is a normal and critical part of human development.

"It's actually a good thing. They do flatter, they do tell white lies, they do lie to conceal their transgressions, it's actually an indication that they have arrived at a certain new stage of their life."

He suggests this is something children learn by modelling the adults around them, taking onboard messages like "Don't tell the man his nose is big, honey," or "Let's not tell Daddy about this, OK?"

"I don't think that we ruin them," Lee maintains. "I think that we prepare them for social life."

"If we tell the truth all the time, our society would be in a terrible state. How can it be possible for humans to have relationships with each other if we are bluntly honest to each other?"

In fact, children who don't learn to grease the social wheels have a hard time making friends, Lee says, noting this a problem for autistic children.

Reebye admits she is delighted when a parent of an autistic child tells her the child has started to lie - a reaction that initially confuses the parent.

She explains that in order to lie, a child's thinking needs to develop to the point where he or she can recognize other individuals are separate from them.

"When I treat autistic children, I get so thrilled when they have this conniving and deceptive quality," she says. "Because that means cognitively they are going higher up."

"That would mean that they know these are your thoughts and these are my thoughts and if I collide with your thoughts I might get something."