

Research gets to heart of the flatter; Even 4-year-olds compliment art more when artist is in room, U of T study shows
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Byline: Andrea Gordon
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Flattery, contrary to the popular saying, can quite often get you somewhere. Like maybe a handful of your pal's Smarties, or a birthday party invitation.

According to new research from the University of Toronto, even preschoolers are savvy enough to know that.

While parents and educators may preach the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the 2007 findings show that by age 4, many children are sophisticated enough in their grasp of social niceties that they readily resort to flattery, otherwise known as exaggerated praise.

"These findings suggest they are thinking ahead, they are making these little social investments for future benefit," says Kang Lee, director of the Institute of Child Study at OISE/U of T and co-author of the report, which was published in the journal *Developmental Science*.

In the study, 285 children ages 3 to 6 were asked to rate drawings by peers and adults they knew and also drawings by unfamiliar adults and kids.

They assessed each using a seven-point scale both when the artist was not in the room, and then when the artist was present.

Three-year-olds were completely honest and consistent in all situations. The 5- and 6-year-olds gave better ratings when the artists were there than when they were absent. Among 4-year-olds, half used flattery and the others were blunt, suggesting this is the transitional period in kids' social understanding of the world.

The children used flattery most with the adults familiar to them, and then with the other kids they knew. They used it to a lesser degree with the adults they didn't know and the least when it came to the unfamiliar kids.

"I'm sure politeness and empathy play some role," Lee said in an interview. "But the fact they gave higher ratings to some groups than others suggests there is some form of ulterior motive beyond just being polite. We socialize kids to show empathy and politeness to everybody, not more to some people than to others."

Lee, a developmental psychologist, says it's the first research he's aware of that looks at flattery and young children. The joint Canadian-Chinese study was conducted in China, but he said previous research indicates results would be consistent among Canadians.

The findings are surprising because they demonstrate that children can master "social ingratiation" techniques at much younger ages than previously thought.

In a 2002 study, Lee studied the responses of kids ages 3 to 11 when they were given a gift they didn't like and found that even 3-year-olds would tell white lies to avoid hurting the gift-giver's feelings.

White lies are typically inconsequential and aimed at sparing someone's feelings - such as thanking someone for a "beautiful sweater" they'll never end up wearing. But flattery tends to be motivated by self-interest, Lee says, and often annoys bystanders. Picture the co-worker flattering the boss or the radio interviewer gushing over her subject.

While these behaviours are a natural part of socialization, Lee says parents need to understand the paradox they can present for young children.

So instead of teaching them about lying in black and white terms, as many parents tend to do with 3- and 4-year-olds, it's important to make distinctions and talk about the grey areas, he says. In other words, that lying to conceal a transgression is not acceptable, whereas showing concern for another person's feelings isn't wrong.

"Kids at 4 or 5 are able to make distinctions already - that this lie is bad but this one is not very bad."

As to what motivates children to flatter or tell white lies, Lee has a few theories. Kids pick up the behaviours in three ways: by observing their parents, such as when dad falsely tells a telemarketer he's eating dinner and can't talk; by getting a negative reaction from adults or other bystanders when they say something blunt and a positive reaction when they are complimentary; and by observing the reactions from the target of their comment - "I don't like the doll you gave me, Grandma."

Or maybe it's a simple case of imitation being the sincerest form of flattery. After all, children of the last few decades have been raised in an era of promoting self-esteem through non-stop praise, where no one is better than anyone else and everyone gets a trophy for participating. No wonder they clue in early to the art of being unduly complimentary.

A Wall Street Journal headline last year summed it up by describing young adults entering the workforce as "the most-praised generation" and the accompanying article warned that without the same treatment from bosses, mates and professors, they may "wither under an unfamiliar compliment deficit."

Jean Twenge's 2006 book *Generation Me* cites excess praise as one reason for the narcissism, anxiety and air of entitlement among many young people.

To Lee, that zeitgeist may well be a factor in young children picking up on flattery.

"This kind of learning takes place very early and very fast. Kids get the message very quickly."

Kids learn power of flattery early; by 4 will tell white lies to ease contact