Do Stories About Lying and Honesty Reduce Lie-Telling Behaviors in Children?

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Since lying behavior is considered a negative phenomenon, except for prosocial lies, it has inspired theoretical and applied research on how to reduce such behaviors. Therefore, in the current study, we aimed to examine whether children's lie-telling behaviors are affected by honesty- and lie-themed stories using an experimental design. A total of 176 children (85 girls), aged 4 to 5 years, were included in the study. We randomly assigned participants to three different experimental groups in which they were told the importance of honesty (the honesty story), the short-term negative consequences of lying (*Pinocchio*), and the fact that lying is a terrible behavior with important consequences (*The Boy Who Cried Wolf*). No moral story was told to the children in the control group. Then, we utilized a "temptation resistance task" to measure the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the control and experimental groups. The results showed that the children in the control group lied more often than the children in all the experimental groups. The analyses conducted to ascertain the differences among the groups also revealed that children who listened to *Pinocchio* used significantly fewer lie-telling behaviors compared to the children who listened to the honesty story and the children in the control group.

Key words: development of lying, honesty, lie-telling behaviors, moral story

Introduction

Stories and fairytales, which contain many feelings about human life and nature, have been told since ancient times. These written and verbal works remain extant because they are one of the various ways used to convey and teach the values emphasized in society to children. In addition, fables, which are more concise stories, emphasize moral and prosocial values by conveying conflicts and experiences through facts (Detlor, 2001; Yao & Enright, 2018). Notably, honesty is one of the main values conveyed to children through such short stories from their preschool period

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onward (e.g., Rahiem et al., 2020; Thompson, 2011).

Honesty and lying are common themes in stories. In addition to Turkish fictional characters such as Kaloghlan, stories such as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, which emerged in different societies in ancient times but were adapted to the context of oral culture and appeared in various cultures, are still being told to children (Demren, 2015). For instance, the theme emphasized in *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* is the moral principle of "do not be a liar." In *Pinocchio*, which is not as old as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* but is known in almost all societies, the story of a wooden puppet whose nose grows whenever he lies is told. The main characteristics of the character Kaloghlan, who frequently appears in Turkish fairy tales, are his honesty, courage, benevolence, generosity and cunning. In general, these stories draw attention to the necessity of not lying and how honesty is an important value. However, it is unclear enough whether such stories affect children's truth- and lie-telling behaviors.

Research on lying has shown that children can tell lies from the age of 2 years in order to conceal transgressions and avoid punishment (Evans & Lee, 2013), although the lies told during the preschool period are usually told for simpler and self-motivated reasons (e.g., to avoid punishment, to hide a transgression or to benefit). However, as children begin to tell lies for different reasons and more successfully, others begin to struggle to detect them (Carl & Bussey, 2022). In popular wisdom, self-motivated lies more often lead to problem behaviors (e.g., Ostrov et al., 2008), so educators and researchers have tried to find various ways to increase children's honesty. The most frequently used method is telling stories to children. However, although values such as honesty are incorporated into educational curricula starting from the preschool period, empirical evidence for the effectiveness of these methods seems to be insufficient.

The Effect of Stories on Lie-Telling Behavior

Few studies have examined the effect of stories on children's lie-telling behavior. However, one study that did, namely that of Lee et al. (2014) conducted with children aged 3–7 years, found that *Pinocchio* and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* are not effective in reducing lying. In the same study, it was found that children who listen to honesty-themed stories lie less often than other children. The researchers considered these results to show that truth-telling behaviors increase when the value of honesty and its positive results are emphasized. In another study conducted by Talwar et al. (2015), the findings were consistent with those of the previous study. That is, while telling stories representing the positive results of honesty to children increases their truth-telling behaviors, when the emphasis is on lying being bad, lie-telling behaviors are not affected. In addition, Talwar et al. (2016) examined whether moral stories affect children's evaluations of lying in the 4–7-year age range. The results showed that children aged 4–7 years who listened to a story that portrayed honesty as being positive rated the story character's truth-telling behaviors more positively than children who listened to a story that portrayed lying as being bad. This study differed in that it addressed children's reasoning about lying rather than lie-telling behaviors themselves.

According to the few studies on the effect of moral stories on truth- and lie-telling behaviors (Lee et al., 2014; Talwar et al., 2016), children's lying behaviors are affected by stories. However, an interesting finding of these studies was that when the positive results of honesty are emphasized, the probability of children telling the truth increases; but

similar effects are not observed when the negative consequences of lying are emphasized. These results have caused confusion, and even though it is difficult to comment on these limited findings, it is worth examining whether these findings were due to the methodology used.

Methodological Aspects of the Research on Lie-Telling Behavior

In the research of Lee et al. (2014), the lie-telling behaviors of children aged 3–7 years were examined using the temptation to resistance task. During this task, children were asked to sit facing the wall, then the researcher took a toy from their bag and asked the children to guess what the toy was from the sound it made. After two easy-to-guess trials, an object that was difficult to guess was chosen during the test phase to test children's sound–object matching ability. Therefore, the possibility of the children using lie-telling behavior was present in this task. However, in Lee et al.'s (2014) study examining whether moral stories affect children's lie-telling behaviors, experimental manipulation in terms of story-telling was used on the children participating in the test phase. In other words, manipulation was used just before the children were given the opportunity to lie or tell the truth. Accordingly, children were exposed to questions about their own behavior, regardless of whether they concealed their transgression; before the story was told, they were asked questions about a behavior they had used. Hence, by using this method, children's truth- and lie-telling behaviors could be tested after they had broken the rules. However, if the stories were told to the children before the temptation to resistance task was used, it was possible to examine whether the children would use lie-telling behavior or conceal their transgression.

Present Study

Reflecting on methodological limitations of previous studies, the present study examines lie-telling behavior using different order of the procedures: We told different stories to the participants in the experimental and control groups before we used the temptation to resistance task. Hence, we could observe the effects of the stories emphasizing the negative results of lying and the positive results of honesty on behavior. To be in line with previous studies, we told *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, *Pinocchio*, and an honesty story to the participants. In this respect, the current research is not only a replication study but also tests the effects of moral stories on honesty behavior with a minor methodological difference. Besides the methodological reorganizations, the fact that the current study was conducted with children growing up in a different culture like Turkey is another feature that makes this study different from previous research. In addition to the emphasis in Turkish culture that children should be strictly prevented from lie-telling (Kinalizade, 2011), it is thought that Turkey has different social characteristics due to the fact that the majority of its population is Muslim. In this respect, adding results from a country with different social dynamics to the studies conducted in Western societies will enrich the literature.

In this study, which utilized an experimental and inter-group design, we aimed to examine whether the lie-telling behaviors of 4–5-year-old children would differ according to the honesty- and lie-themed stories read to them. Accordingly, the hypotheses of the research were as follows: i) Children who are told stories about the positive results of honesty (Experimental Group 1: Honesty story) are expected to lie less often in the temptation to resistance task compared to the chil-

dren in the control group who are not told a story; ii) children who are told stories about the apparent negative consequences of lying (Experimental Group 2: *Pinocchio*) are expected to lie less often in the temptation to resistance task than the children in the control group who are not told a story; iii) children who are told stories about the life-changing and negative consequences of lying (Experimental Group 3: *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*) are expected to lie less often in the temptation to resistance task than the children in the control group who are not told a story. The three stories chosen for the current research are stories that children in Turkey are familiar within school and at home.

Methods

Participants

A total of 176 children aged between 4 and 5 years (48–71 months) participated in the study (M_{age} = 60.5 months old; *SD* = 7.46). The reason for choosing this age group is that children in these age groups are better than younger children in the theory of mind and executive function abilities, which predict lie-telling in children (see Lee & Imuta, 2021; Williams et al., 2016). In addition, the age at which children attend preschool education is generally four years old in Turkey. Participants consisted of children receiving preschool education in Konya, Turkey. Participants comprised 91 boys (51.7%) and 85 girls (48.3%). There were 26 boys and 19 girls (M_{age} = 59.84 months old) in the control group of the study. The first experimental group consisted of 23 boys and 19 girls (M_{age} = 61.78 months old); the second experimental group consisted of 22 boys and 24 girls (M_{age} = 62.84 months old); the third experimental group consisted of 20 boys and 23 girls (M_{age} = 57.42 months old). The participants from the four schools were intended to be distributed into groups according to their age and gender. In this context, firstly, 192 children were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups. The data of 16 children who did not continue the study for various reasons (e.g., distraction, desire to return to the classroom during the task) were not used in the study.

Materials

Lie-Telling Behavior. We used the temptation to resistance task that Talwar and Lee (2002) developed to measure children's lie-telling behavior. This task is frequently used also in Turkey to measure lie telling behavior (e.g., Aydin, 2021; Aydin, 2023). In this task, we played a guessing game with the children, and we told them that if they guessed correctly three times, they would be awarded a prize. After the children were asked to sit facing the wall, the researcher took out a toy from their bag, and the children were asked to guess what the toy was from the sound it made. After two easy-to-guess trials (1 – crying baby, 2 – police car siren), the challenging test phase began. During the test phase, we chose a toy duck, but instead of a duck sound ("quack"), it made sounds similar to those of a music box. Before the children were asked to guess what the toy was, the researcher left the room for a minute and told the children not to look back once the researcher had left. One minute later, the researcher reentered the room, making a noise to indicate that they had arrived. After the children told the researcher their guesses, the researcher asked the children to turn their backs to the researcher. The answers of the children who said that they looked back and could not guess correctly (i.e., confessed the truth) were coded as "1"; the answers of the children who said that they did not turn their backs and correctly guessed that the toy was a duck were coded as "2". We checked

whether the children turned their backs using the classroom camera.

Experimental Conditions. Moral stories, which were the independent variable of the study, were of three types. We told the "honesty" story to the children in the first experimental group. This story emphasized that the protagonist's truth-telling behaviors had positive results. We told the participants in the second experimental group the story of *Pinocchio,* which emphasized that although the consequences were not life-changing, lying led to negative consequences in the moment. We told the participants in the third experimental group the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, in which the emphasis was on lying causing significantly negative, life-changing consequences. Lastly, in the control group, we did not tell participants any story. Translated versions of the stories are available on the following link: https://osf.io/ueb52/?view_only=6e4b32610bfb4ab9a61ef997e22817f2

Procedure

Since the participant groups comprised preschool children, we obtained informed consent for their participation from their parents. Before proceeding, the children were informed about what would be done in the research and their informed consent was also obtained. We conducted the experiment in a quiet and distraction-free room in the preschool. First, we randomly assigned the participants to one of the four groups (three experimental, one control). The researchers

told the children in the experimental groups stories with different emphases on honesty and lying. After the stories were told, children in all experimental groups carried out the temptation to resistance task. Children in the control group were not told any story, and carried out only temptation to resistance task without having been told a story. The procedure took approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete with each child. After the experiment, we gave a preschool magazine, which was also the prize for the guessing game, to each child who had participated in the study.

Results

In this study, we aimed to examine whether the lie-telling behaviors of 4–5-year-old children differed according to the moral stories that they were told. Before proceeding to the main analysis, we calculated descriptive statistics for the distribution of children's lie-telling behaviors by age, and these are presented in Table 1.

Before moving on to the main analysis, Chi-square analysis was conducted to discern whether age and gender significantly affected lie-telling behaviors. The findings showed that age ($\chi^2[1] = .098$, $p = .755$) and gender ($\chi^2[1] = 2.182$, $p = .14$) did not affect children's lie-telling behaviors. In order to test the effects of gender and age of the participating children on lie-telling behavior, regression analysis was conducted in addition to chi-square analysis. Logistic regression analysis was preferred because the variables were categorical. In the

Table 1 *The truth and lie-telling in 4-5- age years*

Age Groups	Truth-Telling (n)	Lie-Telling (n)
4	40 (52.6%)	36 (47.4%)
5	55 (55%)	45 (45%)
Total	95 (54%)	81 (46%)

logistic regression analysis, age groups and gender were entered as predictor variables and stated categorically. Lie-telling behavior was included in the analysis as a predicted variable. According to the findings of the analysis, the model was successful in explaining 55.7% of the lie-telling behaviors. This percentage was slightly above the 50% chance rate. When the contribution of the variables in the model was examined, it was found that age ($\chi^2[1]$ = .139, p = .709) and gender ($\chi^2[1]$ = 2.213, p = .137) variables did not contribute significantly to the predictive power of the model. In addition, the Nagelkerke R^2 value of the model was .018 and it was concluded that the fit index of the model was not enough. In conclusion, logistic regression analyses also showed that age and gender did not predict significantly children's lie-telling behaviors.

To examine whether children's lie-telling behaviors differed significantly between the experimental and control groups, we conducted Chi-square analysis because the dependent variable was categorical. The analyses revealed a significant difference between children's lie-telling behaviors according to whether the story was honesty- or lie-themed ($\chi^2[3]$ = 10.921, p = 0.012). When we performed paired group comparisons to discern the differences between the control and experimental groups, we noticed that there was no significant difference between the lie-telling behavior of the children in the control group and the children in the first experimental group (*Honesty story*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = 1.319, p = 0.251). However, it was observed that the children in the control group used significantly more lie-telling behavior compared to the children in the second experimental group (*Pinocchio*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = 10.598, p = 0.001). Finally, we found that there was no significant difference between the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the control group and the children

in the third experimental group (*The Boy Who Cried Wolf*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = 2.875, p = 0.09). According to these results, we concluded that only the story of *Pinocchio* significantly reduced the lie-telling behaviors of children.

When we conducted Chi-square analysis to discern the differences in lie-telling behavior among the experimental groups, we observed that there were significant differences between the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the first experimental group (honesty story) and those in the second experimental group (*Pinocchio*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = 4.376, p = 0.036). It was found that there was no significant difference between the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the first experimental group (honesty story) and those in the third experimental group (*The Boy Who Cried Wolf*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = .288, p = 0.591). Finally, it was also observed that there were no significant differences between the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the second experimental group (*Pinocchio*) and those in the third experimental group (*The Boy Who Cried Wolf*) ($\chi^2[1]$ = 2.448, p = 0.118). According to the findings, the only difference among the experimental groups in terms of lie-telling behaviors was between the children who were told the honesty story and the children who were told *Pinocchio*. The averages of the lie-telling behaviors of the children in the experimental and control groups are presented in Table 2.

According to the results presented in Table 2, the lie-telling behaviors were less commonly used among the children in the second experimental group (Pinocchio), followed by the third experimental group (The Boy Who Cried Wolf) and the first experimental group (honesty story). Additionally, lie-telling behaviors of the children in the control group were significantly higher than those of the children in the experimental group, namely Pinocchio.

Table 2 *The means of lie-telling behaviors of the control and experimental groups*

Groups	Within Group			Between Groups	
	Truth Telling	Lie-Telling	*N*	Truth Telling	Lie-Telling
Control group	37.8%	62.2%	45	17.9%	34.6%
Exp. Group - 1 (Honesty)	50%	50%	42	22.1%	25.9%
Exp. Group - 2 (Pinocchio)	71.7%	28.3%	46	34.7%	16%
Exp. Group - 3 (The Boy Who Cried Wolf)	55.8%	44.2%	43	25.3%	23.5%

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to examine whether the lie-telling behaviors of preschool children would be affected by honesty- and lie-themed stories. The results revealed that the children who listened to *Pinocchio* used significantly fewer lie-telling behaviors than the children who listened to the honesty story and the children in the control group. These results indicate that moral stories with honesty and lying themes may affect children's lie-telling behaviors.

When we examined the results, although the average lie-telling behaviors of the experimental group participants who were told moral stories was lower than that of the participants in the control group, group comparisons showed that the lie-telling behaviors of the participants who were told the story of *Pinocchio* were significantly fewer. When we examined the differences among the experimental groups, a significant difference in lie-telling behaviors emerged between the children who were told the story about honesty and the children who were told the story of *Pinocchio*. According to these results, we observed that the honesty story group's lie-telling behaviors had a mean value closest to that of the control group.

When we first compared our results with those of the literature, we noticed that the findings obtained from previous studies and ours differ. However, there are few studies about whether moral stories reduce lie-telling behaviors in children. For example, according to Lee et al. (2014), *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*, which emphasizes the positive results of truth-telling behavior, increased truth-telling behavior in preschool children, while *Pinocchio* and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, which emphasize the negative consequences of being dishonest, had no effect on the truth-telling behaviors of children. Similar findings were also obtained in the study of Talwar et al. (2016). The results of these studies can be interpreted according to the fact that children cannot reach high-level cognitive abilities in terms of moral development, so instead of telling stories about lie-telling behavior to preschool children, stories with truth-telling behavior examples can better convey the value of honesty to them. Yet, the present study reached different results from those found in the literature.

The reason why the most effective story among the participants in the current study was *Pinocchio* could be due to the fact that children pay more attention to momentary behavioral events. Children in early childhood give more importance to their physical characteristics, even when describing themselves (Keller et al., 1978), which may have caused them to be more affected by the visible out-

comes in *Pinocchio*. In addition, well-known researchers in the field of moral development have claimed that reward and punishment play an important role in the development of moral reasoning in preschool children (e.g., Kohlberg, 1975; Piaget, 1932). At this point in their development, emphasizing that "lying and crime do not go unpunished," as is done in *Pinocchio,* may be more important for children.

Pinocchio may also have affected children's truth- and lie-telling behavior more significantly due to their familiarity with the story. Compared to the other stories used in our study, *Pinocchio* is familiar to most children in Turkey, and parents and educators often mention it in reference to lying and honesty (Kardas & Kardas, 2018). Hence, familiar stories may activate children's schemas about lying being bad more effectively.

It would be appropriate to make some suggestions about reducing the lie-telling or increasing the truth-telling behaviors of pre-school children. While creating stories about lying and/or honesty, characters that the child can identify with should be used, and the negative effects of lie-telling behaviors in terms of physical and material characteristics should be emphasized. Experimental research can also be conducted on the effects of the realistic or unrealistic environments created in stories about truth- and lie-telling behaviors read to children. Furthermore, experimental research can be conducted on the effect of identifying with the protagonist or another character, who is affected by the positive or negative consequences of the protagonist's behavior in the honesty-themed stories read to a preschool child.

It may also be possible to adapt the findings of this study to educational environments and curricula. In many countries with different cultural backgrounds such as Turkey, America, and China, the value of honesty is incorporat-ed into character and value education during the preschool period (see Aydin & Akyol-Gürler, 2012; McClelan, 1999). According to the results of our study, it seems appropriate to use translations of *Pinocchio* in various societies to increase the truth-telling behavior of children and reduce their lie-telling behavior. Based on our results, fairytales and stories with content similar to that of *Pinocchio* may be created for pre-school children. Since the cognitive capacities of children in these age groups are better at understanding concrete events rather than abstract ones, designing stories such as Pinocchio where children can see what is happening seems important at this point. In addition, research can focus on whether similar stories are effective in older age groups. It would also be important for the literature to examine the effect of different stories on increasing honesty for primary school children.

Although our research is innovative in many respects, it is necessary to consider some of its limitations. Since lie-telling behaviors in preschool children were only examined in our study using the few tasks mentioned in the literature, research utilizing a between-subject design may be necessary. Considering that task familiarity may occur in children due to similar practices being used, this limitation can be considered reasonable. Nevertheless, designing new tasks appropriate for preschool children and investigating the current research problem with a between-subject design would also contribute to the literature. Another limitation is that the city in which we conducted this study is in an area of Turkey that can be considered nationalist and conservative in terms of cultural and personal values (Koyuncu, 2013). Since studies about lying and understanding lying have mentioned cultural differences related to this issue (Fu et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2001; Mojdehi et al., 2020), research conducted in

metropolitan cities in Turkey may allow for a better interpretation of the differences between and within cultures. In addition, in the current study, no control question was asked about whether the children knew the stories before. Although it is thought that pre-school aged children in Turkey are familiar with these stories, examining the effects of stories that children know and stories that children have never heard before may bring new questions for researchers. It may be important to see the immediate effects of stories that children are not familiar with in this respect. Finally, religion may play important role in people's lives and is also effective in regulating interpersonal relations, so it can also make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the subject of lying. Some empirical studies conducted with adults have shown that religion has an effect on attitudes toward lying (e.g., Balim & Aydin, 2024; Cantarero et al., 2018; Oliveira & Levine, 2008). Considering that the participants in the current study were younger children, and children were gradually exposed to socialization processes, it would be useful in the future to study topics such as the religious beliefs of the parents, their level of religiosity, and whether they raised their children according to religious rules.

In summary, our study is important since it adds findings from different cultures to the few studies on the issue and offers suggestions for the improvement of character and value education. Our results also show that stories that emphasize the physical and material aspects of lie- and truth-telling behaviors told to preschool children are more effective in changing their behaviors.

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