



The role of emotional understanding in children's altruistic lie-telling

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➤ Introduction ➤

Altruistic lies are produced to serve another person's interests often at one's own expense (e.g., Talwar & Crossman, 2011). Recent studies have shown that children as young as 4 years old are able to tell altruistic lies to help others to feel better or to obtain a gain, at their own expense (e.g., Talwar et al., 2017). However, the factors involved in the development of this ability are still poorly understood. The objective of this research is to study the determinants of the emergence of altruistic lies in children, particularly emotional understanding and empathy. Indeed, understanding and feeling the emotions of others from their point of view could encourage the child to produce an altruistic lie.

➤ Method ➤

Participants. 144 children (78 ♀ 66 ♂) aged 4 to 11 years (Mage=7 years 7 months ; SD=2 months)

Procedure. The experiment was conducted individually and it lasted for 25 minutes on average.

1. The experimenter invited the child and the adult confederate to play a four-part game (for each game part won, a gift offered).

The first one who has no more tokens wins the game.



2. The child wins the firsts three game and gets three gifts (Adult confederate is pretending to lose).



3. The experimenter leaves the room and asks the players to finish the game. The child wins and the adult asks him to lie to get the last gift.

Can you tell him I won to get the last gift?



4. The experimenter comes back and the adult confederate leaves the room.

May I go out and make a call?



5. The child chooses to lie or not.

Who won the last part?



Lie-telling to help another. The children's answers to the question "who won the last part?" were used to classify them into the categories "revealing the truth" (coded 0) or "helping liars" (coded 1).

Emotion understanding. The participants completed the Test of Emotion Comprehension (TEC, Pons & Harris, 2000) which measures the 9 components of emotional understanding (score from 0 to 9).

Empathy. The parents completed the Griffith Empathy Measure (GEM, Dadds et al., 2008) which measures the cognitive and affective components of their child's empathy (GEMt score from - 92 to + 92; GEMcog score from - 24 to + 24; GEMaff score from - 36 to + 36).

➤ Results ➤

Table 1. Correlations between Emotion measures with age control.

Emotion measures	Emotion measures			
	1	2	3	4
1. TEC	-			
2. GEMt	.037	-		
3. GEM cog	.139	.288*	-	
4. GEM aff	-.039	.787*	.186	-

*p < .01.

Table 2. Mean (SDs) scores on Emotion measures as a function of children's behavior.

Emotion measures	Type of Child		
	Truth-teller n= 94	Lie-teller n= 50	Total n= 144
TEC	4.97 (1.97)	6.52 (1.18)	5.51 (1.88)
GEMt	24.58 (18.34)	28.96 (16.49)	26.10 (17.78)
GEM cog	3.68 (7.87)	5.38 (10.21)	4.27 (8.75)
GEM aff	5.48 (11.29)	6.98 (11.29)	6 (11.28)

Lie-telling Behavior.

A hierarchical logistic regression was conducted on children's lie-telling behavior. Coefficients for the logistic regression are displayed in **Table 3**.

Table 3. Hierarchical logistic regression model for children's lie-telling behavior, *p < .01.

	B	SE	Wald	OR	χ ²
Step 1					18.856*
Age	.001	.000	16.539	1.001*	
Step 2					10.685*
TEC	.421	.153	7.592	1.524*	
GEMt	.014	.011	1.641	1.014	

Note. Step 1: Nagelkerke R² = .0169; step 2: Nagelkerke R² = .256.

- ✓ Effect of Age
- ✓ Effect of Emotion Understanding
- ✓ Not effect of Empathy

➤ Conclusion ➤

A better understanding of the others' emotional state and the fact that it can be impacted by our behaviors promotes the emergence of altruistic lies in children. However, empathy does not seem to have a direct effect on the production of altruistic lies. Before any definitive conclusion is reached, other tools should be used to assess empathy in children (e.g., self-assessment questionnaire). In addition, our results show that children, as they grow older, produce more lies, which is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Talwar et al., 2017).