Abstract

This study investigates how verbal labeling of lie telling behavior affects children's evaluation of liar in three types of lies: selfish lies (SL), polite lies (PL) and altruistic lies (AL). Fifty-two children between age 5 to 6.5 years old were recruited from kindergartens and randomly assigned to a labeling (LG) and non-labeling group (NG). All the participants completed a series of tests for verbal and nonverbal intelligence, second-order false belief, interpretive theory-of-mind (ToM) and lie evaluation. In the lie evaluation task, children were told six stories, two for each lie type. In LG, the experimenter explicitly said that the protagonist told a lie in each story, e.g. "Anna told a lie and said…", while in NG, only a description of the behavior was made, e.g. "Anna said…" Children were asked to rate the protagonists' lie telling behavior from very very bad (-3) to bad (-1) or good (1) to very very good (3). Summated scores of each lie type were used for analysis. Result: (1) Positive correlation was found between SL vs PL and PL vs AL after controlling for age, intelligence and false belief. (2) Correlation between lie types SL vs AL and between PL vs AL were significantly stronger with than without lie labeling. (3) Evaluation scores of PL and AL, but not SL, were significantly lower when they're labelled. (4) Interpretive ToM, but not second-order false belief, correlated positively with difference between AL vs PL, and between AL vs SL in LG but not NG, suggesting it as a protective factor of labeling effect in evaluating AL. Implication: Despite the pro-social nature of PL and AL, (1) the more strongly children believe lies are bad, or (2) when PL and AL are explicitly labeled as lies, the more likely that children are discouraged from appreciating the liar's positive intention and may further prevent them from engaging in PL and AL telling. Fortunately, the labeling effect in AL is attenuated by interpretive ToM.