

# Harsh Discipline Fosters Dishonesty In Young Children

Young children exposed to a harshly punitive school environment are more inclined to lie to conceal their misbehaviour than are children from non-punitive schools, a study of three- and four-year-old West African children suggests.

The study, published in the journal *Child Development* (MNT 26-10-11), also indicates that children in a punitive environment are able to tell more convincing lies than those in a non-punitive environment.

The research, by Professor Victoria Talwar of McGill University and Professor Kang Lee of the University of Toronto, examined deceptive behaviours in two groups of children living in the same neighbourhood. One group was enrolled in a private school that used a traditional authoritarian discipline model, in which beating with a stick, slapping of the head, and pinching were administered publicly and routinely for offenses ranging from forgetting a pencil to being disruptive in class. In the other school, also private, children were disciplined with time-outs or scolding and, for more serious offenses, were taken to the principal's office for further reprimand.

The study involved an experiment comparing the behaviour of children in the two schools. Children were seen individually and asked to play a guessing game by an experimenter who was born and raised locally. The children were told not to peek at a toy when left alone in a room. Most children in both schools couldn't resist the temptation, and peeked at the toy. When the experimenter asked if they had peeked, nearly all the peekers from the punitive school lied - compared with just over half of those from the non-punitive school. What's more, after the initial lie, lie-tellers from the punitive school were better able to maintain their deception when answering follow-up questions about the identity of the toy - by deliberately giving an incorrect answer, for example, or by feigning ignorance, rather than blurting out the name of the toy.

The findings suggest that "a punitive environment not only fosters increased dishonesty but also children's abilities to lie to conceal their transgressions," Talwar and Lee conclude. In fact, the three- and four-year-old lie-tellers in the punitive school were as advanced in their ability to tell convincing lies as six- to

seven-year-old lie-tellers in existing studies. "This finding is surprising," the authors note, as "existing studies have consistently found that children from punitive environments tend to suffer general delays in cognitive development."

"One possibility is that the harsh punitive environment heightens children's motivation to come up with any strategies that will help them survive in that environment," Prof. Lee says. "Lying seems particularly adaptive for the situation."

"Our study, I think, may serve as a cautionary tale for parents who sometimes would use the harshest means of punishment when they catch their children lying. It is clear that corporal punishment not only does not reduce children's tendency to lie, but actually improves their lying skills."

Earlier studies on corporal punishment have also raised many questions on the effect of harsh disciplining on children. Grabbing a child firmly by the arm, yelling and repeatedly punishing him or her may not be without long-term risks, according to researchers from the Université de Montréal (Science Daily 21 September 2010). They were studying how this harsh parenting can impair the emotional development of a child, possibly leading to anxiety disorders such as social phobia, separation anxiety and panic attacks.

"Several studies have shown that coercive parenting practices are linked to anxiety," said Françoise Maheu a professor at the Université de Montréal's Department of Psychiatry and lead investigator of the study. "We know that common practices such as spanking or excessive punishment do not instill a strong discipline. Quite the opposite, they have a lasting psychological impact on children."

Maheu and her team are investigating specifically how the anatomy or physiology of the brain is affected by this parenting. They are in the process of recruiting 120 youths aged 12 to 17 years. These youths will be split into four groups according to two variables: their current anxiety symptoms and their parent's current harsh parenting practices. While doing behavioural tests, the children will be subjected to functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), where their brain activity (cerebral activity) will be measured. Maheu will then be able to correlate brain activity with fear and anxiety.

"My hypothesis is that two specialized structures, the amygdala and the anterior cingulate cortex, which form the neural fear circuit, play a role in mediating the anxiety associated with harsh parenting. We are investigating these structures

because they are strongly associated with the processing of threat cues" says Maheu.

"Investigating the links among harsh parenting, fear circuitry and anxiety in youths will provide key insights on the developmental neurobiology of harsh parenting and anxiety," adds Maheu. "Understanding this while individuals are young is crucial as it could lead to early interventions that would effectively interrupt a development trajectory early in its course, before anxiety becomes chronic."