

What if George Washington Lied?



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February 22nd is George Washington's birthday and I remember a story about his childhood. It's reported that George chopped down a cherry tree, and when his irate father saw the damage and asked his son if he knew who did the deed, George owned up: "I cannot tell a lie."

But what if George *had* lied? What if he'd denied being the culprit? What if he'd insisted that it must have been the act of some other kid with an axe? Would his father have been able

to detect the deception?

A frustrated parent asking, "Did you eat that candy?" will have a chocolate-covered toddler answering, "No!" in order to remove the stern expression from a caregiver's face. Three- and four-year olds tell tall tales and create imaginary friends. By the time they are about seven, children start to lie to avoid doing chores or homework, to get something they want, to protect someone else, and to avoid punishment. And, of course, teenagers lie to cover up sexual activity, drug or alcohol use, and (almost always) about what time they actually got home last night.

When children are telling the truth, they are most often relaxed, with facial expressions and gestures that reflect this. But when lying, they undergo a heightened stress response that can be spotted by an observant parent. (As we grow older, we also grow better at deception – and it is not so easy to discover.)

So if George had responded in the negative when asked about the tree-chopping incident, his father could have watched for signs of a dry mouth (and the lip licking that accompanies it), eye contact that suddenly can't be held or, conversely, is held too intently, an increased blink rate, face touching, squirming, biting the lips or tightly squeezing them together, head and shoulder movements that are arrested part way into the gesture, and a smile that appears at inappropriate times.

Mr. Washington might also have spotted a telltale "micro expression" (a genuine emotion that flashes across someone's face in less than one-fifth of a second) or a "suppressed expression" which slips out before realized and is then "caught" and replaced with a preferred reaction.

Another deception cue he might have observed was his son's rigid posture and lack of spontaneous hand gestures. Many liars "tighten up" and inhibit their natural [body language](#) –

as if afraid that *any* movement will expose the falsehood.

George's dad should also have been advised to note the timing of his son's verbal response. When a lie is planned (and rehearsed), deceivers start their answers more quickly than truth-tellers. If taken by surprise, however, the liar takes longer to respond – as the process of inhibiting the truth and creating a lie takes extra time. And he should have been on the watch for a variety of stalling tactics fibbers use while trying to figure out how to respond: Liars tend to repeat the question you just asked, make irrelevant statements to divert attention, or try to put you on the defensive.

So – was the George Washington boyhood story true? Maybe. But, if not, I hope his father caught the lie.



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