

## **Deception in action: Exploring the earliest manifestations of deceptive skills in early childhood**

**This project aims to describe how the frequency and manner of young children's attempts to mislead others change when they try to deceive others. The project also aims to find the socio-cognitive competencies that developmentally precede children's ability to deceive.**

Although most people have very negative views about the attempts to mislead other people, deception occurs in daily life. On average, people admit that they lie at least once a day. In case of not telling the truth, people do not attach much importance to their lies. What is more, they are not afraid that someone will catch them lying. The situation is different in the case of children's lies. Although parents can happen to behave untruthful, they teach their children to always tell the truth. **The generally view is that "children are honest." However, this "conventional wisdom" is not in agreement with the results of the existing studies on children's lies and non-verbal deception.** Even preschool children (3- to 6-year-old) have a substantial repertoire of deceptive behaviors. For example, children can deny their forbidden actions to avoid the negative consequences, or they can deceive others by navigating them to false locations of hidden objects to keep these objects for themselves, or accuse the others of children's own transgressions, or give false excuses that they cannot do something. Therefore, preschoolers can try to achieve their goals by misleading others. However, much less is known about the deception of children under the age of 3.

The very few studies on verbal deception in 2-year-old children show that as young children can lie if they attempt to get or avoid something. However, 2-year-olds lie much less often than preschool children, perhaps because of their language competencies lower than those of preschoolers. It might be suggested that the limited language skills of 2-year-old children make them to use non-verbal means to deceive, in a way similar to the tactical deceptions of non-human primates, instead of telling lies. **To date, no research has examined the nonverbal deceptions of young children in their natural environments instead of lab-settings. It is not clear at what age children start trying to mislead another person in a non-verbal manner, or how the frequency of the deceptive attempts changes during the first months once the child's deceptive behavior has appeared.**

The Sonatina project will follow upon the developmental changes in the frequency and types of deceptive behavior in infants and toddlers, and examine the cognitive competencies that may support the development of deception in 2-year-old children. In line with the existing theoretical models, the ability to deceive may depend on such socio-cognitive competencies as follows: 1) **understanding the perception of other people**, having known what they can see or hear at a given circumstances; 2) **child's ability to self-control their behavior**, e.g. when a child can refrain from doing something if an adult forbids it, or for child's own prolonged interests; and 3) **engaging in teasing episodes** in which one person pretends they want to do something (e.g. hand over a toy), and then playfully interrupts the action before the action is completed (e.g. the person withdraws the hand with the toy before a partner will pick up the toy). These hypothesized relations will be examined in a 7-month longitudinal study outlined in my grant proposal. In this study, deceptive attempts occurring at selected week each month will be registered by the parent in a dedicated tool available online. These deceptive attempts will be then counted and classified by the study team. Children and their parents will also participate in 2 laboratory sessions in which the above-mentioned socio-cognitive competencies of each child will be assessed and analyzed statistically.

By identifying the competencies that help the children in deceptive attempts, the project will contribute to the ongoing discussion on the cognitive foundations of deception. **The project will also provide new data on young children's deceptive behavior in their natural environment, which may help to diagnose atypical behaviors, different from the normative pattern at a given age. This will alert the parents if deceptions that deviate from the typical occur, as they may be the early signs of problems with social adaptation.**