



## Children Are Too Gullible

### Let's begin here: Which do you think is most true?

You can fool all the people some of the time,  
and some of the people all the time, but you  
cannot fool all the people all the time.

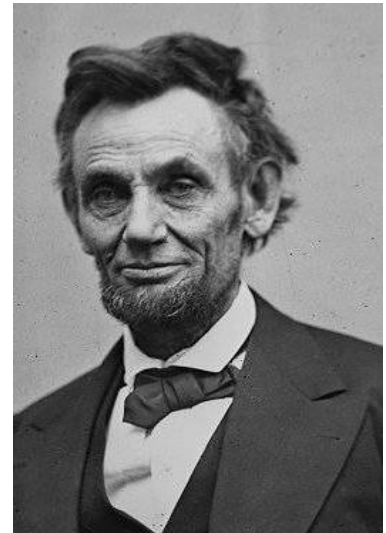
~ Abraham Lincoln

It may be true that you can't fool all the people all the time,  
but you can fool enough of them to rule a large country.

~ Will Durant

You can fool too many of the people too much of the time.

~ James Thurber



### Now let's talk about children.

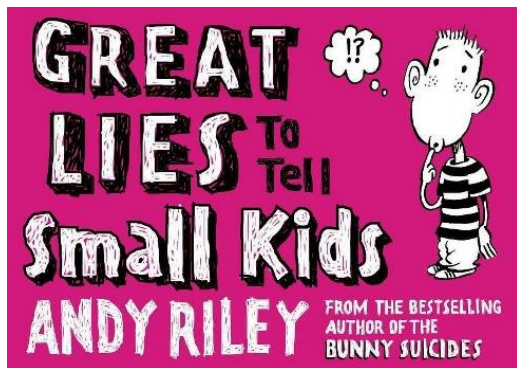
Have you heard of the tree octopus, the endangered species that lives in trees of the Pacific Northwest in Washington State and British Columbia? That hoax was used by researchers at the University of Connecticut to test school children for their tendency to believe what they read on the Internet.

The children had been prescreened in a way that would have suggested they could



discriminate between true and false, but every student believed the content if they didn't have information that it was a hoax. The social psychologists found "that **kids believe virtually everything they hear**. Belief seems to be the default reaction to new information – not doubt or even neutrality."

If you are old enough to have attended school in the 1950s – a time when Americans tended to be both optimistic and oddly fearful – you will not be surprised by children’s gullibility. That was the generation after all, that had not only fire drills, but bomb drills. For the latter, children were taught that in case of an atomic bomb attack, they should crouch under their desks to protect themselves. Few questioned the ridiculousness of that.



Andy Riley is the author of multiple, perversely humorous books, including *Great Lies to Tell Small Kids*, who has long known how easy it is to fool children.

Some of his suggested lies are just silly:

- One in ten fish

are afraid of water.

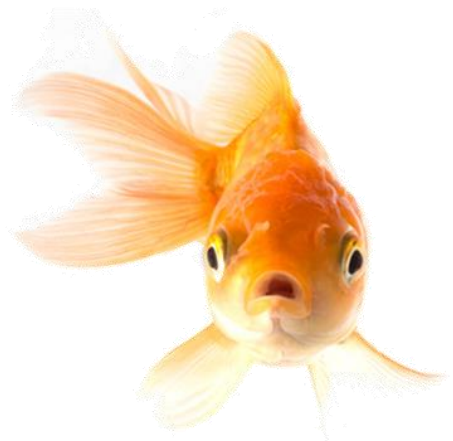
- The Great Wall of China has a cat flap every five miles.

Some are intended to get kids to do dumb stuff:

- The book is dated, because hardly anyone has a phone where this would make sense anymore: If you shove uncooked spaghetti down the little holes in the phone receiver, it'll shoot out your friend's ear.
- Put a slice of ham in the DVD player; it will play a short film about pigs.

And some of his suggested lies were meant to mess with their minds:

- Bowling balls have retractable eyes.
- Over 2500 clouds crash every year.



- Eggs talk to each other after you shut the fridge door.

Talk about it:

- What **unusual things did you** believe when you were a kid (often because an older brother told you it was so)?
  - Did you try to fool other kids? If so, did you ever get in trouble for it?



### Adults are often complicit



- As a child yourself, did you believe in Santa/St. Nick, the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy?
- How did you feel when the truth was revealed?
- Did your *children* believe in Santa/St. Nick, the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy?
- How did you handle revealing the truth to them? What was their reaction?

***Finally, how can we help both children and adults to identify truth from fiction?***

You can start [here](#) with the News Literacy Project.