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Teddy bears in the boardroom

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By Susan Pigg

Adults are less prone to cheat and lie and more likely to engage in “pro-social” behaviour if they’ve got a few reminders of their childhood — teddy bears and even crayons — within easy reach, says a study by two Harvard University researchers.

The study found the number of people who cheated on a set of money-making psychological tests dropped 20 per cent if they had some exposure to a stuffed toy first or had engaged in children’s activities such as drawing. The researchers have dubbed it “the return to innocence effect.”

“These child-related cues really bring to the front our good side and suppress our bad side,” says Sreedhari Desai, a research fellow at Harvard’s Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics. “They remind us of the notion of moral purity.” It’s too early to tell. The study subjects were under the age of 30. Desai and her partner Francesca Gino are now trying to recruit executives from Asia and elsewhere to test their theories.

But Toronto-based business behaviour expert **Linda Allan** is skeptical. “I’ve seen executives’ desks with little stuffed toys, drawings and heart-shaped frames and I’ve got to tell you, it doesn’t make one iota of difference whether people are ethical or not.”

She recalls working with someone a few years ago who had a Bible on her credenza, right next to her daughter’s baby shoes. “I’ve never worked with someone who had more trouble speaking the truth in my life. Everything was a misrepresentation, an exaggeration or an outright lie.”

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