



Family Focus

The Dangers of Gossip in Our Schools

By Margie Ryerson

“It’s just harmless gossip!”
But is it really? There is a vast difference between sharing information that is helpful or newsworthy (“Pete is in the hospital,” or “Kristen got engaged”) and gossiping. (“Did you hear that Gina is having an affair?”) Often gossip is not based on factual information, and like the game “telephone,” it can easily be distorted when it is passed on to others. And it can be very hurtful.

In our community, school gossip is a serious issue that flares up at times. As we know all too well, gossip and rumors at school or online can cause its intended victims much despair. Suicide is the chief concern, and symptoms such as depression, cutting, drug use, and eating disorders can arise in response to emotional pain.

Middle schools are particularly fertile grounds for rumor and innuendo. Children at this stage tend to be impulsive, naïve, and suggestible. They are in the developmental phase of forming their identities in relation to their peers, and it is a self-conscious and self-absorbed time. And because they are so preoccupied with what their peers think of them, they are extremely vulnerable to the malicious effects of gossip.

Typically, people gossip in order to relieve boredom and create excitement, or to feel more powerful and to align themselves with others in power. Gossip spreads quickly because it only takes a moment of indiscretion or poor judgment to participate. While adults usually have control over their impulses and can censor themselves, young adolescents are especially susceptible to the lure of gossip as they compete for social standing among their peers.

Many parents feel helpless if their child becomes the object of nasty rumors. It is especially difficult to combat this type of viciousness when the perpetrators are anonymous. School personnel can help and need to be notified. Your child can learn to speak up for herself, briefly and unemotionally, if she is confronted with hurtful accusations. A few possible responses are: “That’s ridiculous,” “Why would someone say such garbage?” or “You don’t actually believe that, do you?” Then she can change the subject or walk away. By maintaining control, she will deny others the payoff from their gossip and help dispel it more quickly. Trying to ignore

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And so much bad in the best of us,
That it hardly behooves any of us
To talk about the rest of us.*

Edward Wallis Hoch,
newspaper editor & former governor of Kansas (1849 - 1925)

hurtful words is also a possibility, but students’ body language often gives them away when they flinch or look sad or angry.

Children need to learn from an early age that gossiping is wrong and harmful, and that they will experience strict consequences for engaging in it. Of course we also need to “do as we say.” If our children hear us participating in gossip, they will learn to do it as well. Even if you think you are speaking in private, children have a way of listening the most attentively when you least want them to.

It is especially important that we avoid encouraging or repeating gossip that our children may bring home from school or elsewhere. It’s not easy being a role model, but it serves our kids well if we show them it is important to avoid the temptation to gossip about others.

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