

Published March 28th, 2012

Family Focus Parental Discretion Advised

By Margie Ryerson, MFT



Margie Ryerson, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in Orinda and Walnut Creek. Contact her at 925-376-9323 or margierye@yahoo.com. She is the author of *Treat Your Partner Like a Dog: How to Breed a Better Relationship* and *Appetite for Life: Inspiring Stories of Recovery from Anorexia, Bulimia, and Compulsive Overeating*.

One of the most common parenting problems I see, especially in our era of reality and talk television and constant electronic accessibility, is difficulty maintaining discretion with one's children. We already have the problem in our society of children becoming too aware of serious adult domestic and personal problems displayed on magazine covers, internet stories, blogs, video clips, and television shows. But, in addition, many parents unintentionally reveal too much about themselves or about others to their children and consequently cross boundaries that need to be in place between parent and child. We all know how important it is to limit exposure to certain media when children are young and impressionable. But what some parents fail to realize is that they are sometimes the source of unhealthy exposure for their children.

Some examples, all taken from my therapy practice but with identifying information changed, are as follows:

- Karyn brings in her 11-year-old daughter, Cassidy, for treatment for anxiety. Cassidy is increasingly unable to spend time at friends' houses or even at school without developing severe stomach pain. She does not want to be separated from her mother. Cassidy's mother, Karyn, has been struggling in her marriage and frequently cries when she is alone in her bedroom or bathroom. She talks to her sister and one of her close friends about her problems, either in person or on the phone. Karyn has always been a doting mom, but she doesn't realize that Cassidy is well-aware of her state of mind and frequently eavesdrops on her conversations and her meltdowns. Cassidy is a sensitive child who worries about her mom, herself, and the other members of her family. Children usually feel helpless in being able to effect change and can only worry and despair when they see signs of serious family problems.

- Terry and Anita call to have me see their daughter, Bryn, a high school sophomore, because she has become

increasingly defiant with them, and her grades have dropped from a B+ average to low C's. Bryn is a sweet, sensitive teen who confides to me that she actually feels guilty about her behavior and her poor performance in school. But she is also very angry at her father. He is a successful attorney and she has always looked up to him. But recently she has discovered that he smokes pot on a daily basis and looks at inappropriate websites on the computer. These behaviors are very distressing to Bryn, but she feels too uncomfortable to address them with her father. From my perspective, Bryn's father, Terry, is an adult and he can make his own choices. But he didn't protect his daughter well enough from the effects of his choices, and she has suffered as a result.

- Laurie is 44 and the married mother of three children, ages 10-17. She has been having an affair with a married man from another state whom she met online. They meet every two months or so, and they talk and text constantly. Laurie's husband works long hours as a business executive, and she is certain that he doesn't suspect anything. Laurie comes in to see me because she is confused and scared. But as we proceed to discuss her situation, she acknowledges that she has been so distracted that she didn't realize her children knew about her extramarital relationship. Understandably, she now adds extreme guilt to the mix since she never wanted them to know. But the damage has been done because Laurie did not effectively shield her children from the details of her messy life.

Unfortunately, there are too many examples to cite them all here. In my next column I will address situations where parents cross boundaries and become enmeshed with their children; the parents who say their teen children are their best friends. In all of these instances, children lose their sense of security and safety when they are exposed to more than they are emotionally or intellectually equipped to handle. They suffer and can become depressed, anxious, angry, and/or rebellious. They can turn to drugs, alcohol, eating-disordered behavior, cutting, and other means of escaping from their feelings and from their out-of-control lives. Parents did not intend harm in any of these cases. It is up to all of us to be mindful and cautious in limiting our children's exposure to adult issues.

Reach the reporter at: margieryr@yahoo.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA