

Why People Gossip (And What to Say to Gossipy Kids)

Today, when web sites and talk shows present rumors as news, and sarcasm is rampant in what public figures say about each other, it's hard not to gossip. Too often, however, these comments turn vicious and get perpetuated fast--within minutes--through texting, Twitter, e-mail, and social networking sites. Worse yet, they can live forever, archived in our cyber communications. Unkind remarks can embarrass and humiliate kids and adults, ruin self-esteem and even drive kids to suicide. Perhaps worst of all, many adults applaud the snide and cruel dialog on television reality shows and unthinkingly model tolerance for gossip to their children.

Some time ago, the "Wall Street Journal" published a story that started out "Before you gossip, ask yourself, 'Is it kind? Is it true? Is it necessary?'" Too often, said writer Jeffrey Zaslow, children grow up without guidance about what is appropriate conversation. "They say harsh and hurtful things about each other. Encouraged by the snarkiness in pop culture today, they seem more sarcastic than past generations," he went on.

The three questions suggested in his article are centuries old, attributed to Socrates and Buddhist teachings. They've been repeated by the Indian spiritual leader Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who added, "Will it hurt anyone? Will it improve on the silence?" They are important today for those of us adults who want to think twice about what we say, who want to model truth and kindness for our children, and who need to squelch the nasty language and insinuations we hear from too many kids.

Why Do People Gossip?

Distinguishing "news" from "gossip" can be difficult, but understanding why people often gossip--especially when the information being spread is inaccurate--can help us make the distinction.

Typical reasons for gossiping, including spreading rumors:

- To feel superior. Gossips often want to be perceived as people who know more than others. Or, if they feel badly about themselves, they may create or spread stories to make it sound as if others are worse off.
- For attention. Recognition (attention) is a human need, but those who do not feel adequately recognized for their actions may gossip to be the center of attention, even if briefly. (Similarly, kids may act out when they need attention.)
- For control. If gossiping makes you feel superior and if it makes you the center of attention, you'll likely have more power in your group. Some people use gossip, distortions or rumors (think of recent political campaigns) to increase their status in a group or reduce someone else's.

- To feel included. If you're in a group where everyone is talking about people, whether truthfully or not, you may feel as if you have to come up with something--accurate information, gossip or rumor--to be included.
- Jealousy or a need for revenge. "Getting back" at someone is too often done with gossip, especially with gossip spread online.
- Boredom. People who are busy at something productive, or can always think of a new project, are less likely to gossip.

Thinking again about "true, kind, necessary," let's summarize all the possible ways of responding to gossip. One risk of responding with "true, kind, necessary" is that the gossip-teller may perceive that you're being judgmental, and may be offended that you're not impressed with this news. How can adults or your kids respond in a way that doesn't offend the gossip-teller or others who may be enjoying the gossip?

What about claiming that the news is simply too distasteful? Especially if you've appeared to enjoy gossip before, you might say, "I'm just not in the mood today."

Gossip isn't always harmful. Sometimes it truly is a means of sharing or soliciting innocent news ("How is Jane these days?" doesn't necessarily mean you're looking for the latest dirt). Unfortunately, popular culture encourages us to be increasingly critical of each other, often about trivia. The Internet is making it easier for anything we say to be spread to more people very fast, and in a form that is virtually permanent.

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