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FAMILY TIES

Gossip

WHY PEOPLE DO IT AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

“Is it kind, is it true, is it necessary?” That’s the adage I grew up hearing. It’s always been the necessary that held the most punch for me. I could share something that wasn’t unkind and it may be true, but was it necessary?

Many times I’ve held my thoughts, because what I was tempted to share wasn’t necessary. I also remember trying to defend myself by saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But the truth was that words did hurt! And there was the Golden Rule based on Matthew 7:12, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them to do to you....” (NIV)



In adulthood, a concept I’ve found to be helpful is to never share anything with someone who is not part of the problem or the solution to the problem. With all this good information and our good intentions, why does gossip thrive in our society?

Perhaps it’s helpful for us to consider why people say unkind things and why humans are so prone to gossip. The definition of “gossip” is two-fold. As a noun, it defines a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others. As a verb, it is defined as a rumor or report of a personal, sensational or intimate nature.

Typical reasons for gossiping, including spreading rumors, stem from several emotionally-based factors. Some need to feel superior, wanting to be perceived as people who know more than others. If someone feels badly about himself, he may create or spread stories to make it sound as if others are worse off. Another trigger is the need for recognition or attention. Those who don’t feel adequately recognized for their actions may gossip to be the center of attention, even if briefly.

A need for control also triggers gossip. If it makes you feel superior and if it makes you the center of attention, you 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. Gossip can be part of feeling included. If everyone else is talking about people, whether truthfully or not, you may feel compelled to come up with something—accurate information, gossip or rumor—to be included.

People also gossip because of jealousy or a need for revenge. It can also be related to boredom. People who are busy at something productive, or can always think of a new project, are less likely to gossip.

So what are some productive ways to respond to gossip—our own propensity as well as teaching our children how to counter it? First of all, we need to define it, understand the motivators and know how to stop it. In addressing this with our children, it’s okay to tell them that we are curious people, desiring to be “in the know.” They need to know that gossip magazines, TV programs, e-mail, texting, social networks and Twittering all contribute to a culture of trivia and gossip, which is not healthy for us at any age!

Our children also need to know that if they hear something that may or may not be gossip, they should check out the facts. For instance, if they hear a rumor about someone, they can go to that person. If they don’t feel comfortable and the rumor is something serious, they need to know they can come to you or another trusted adult. Getting someone to help in a serious situation is not gossip as long as the information stays with you and the person you go to for help.

Helpful scriptures include Leviticus 19:16, Proverbs 11:13, Proverbs 18:8 and Ephesians 4:29.

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Author’s Note: Some ideas adapted from ParentingPress.com.