

Nipping Gossip in the Bud

By Laura Paul

If your daughter is over the age of a fetus, she has probably gossiped. When your daughter says she was humiliated by gossip at school, don't blow it off by saying it's no big deal and people will forget about it by tomorrow. Experts say teenagers live as though there is no tomorrow and need your empathy when they are hurting.



Kathleen Kampfe of Lutz, Fla., says gossiping is something girls do without realizing the damage they cause by hurting another's reputation. Her daughter, Aysha, 17, has been a hardworking student focused on academics and an after-school job. However, even the most outstanding teenagers gossip on occasion.

"One time by accident, she left the computer on, and I saw they were gossiping," Kampfe says. "I was disappointed to see she participated."

Kampfe wishes, as a parent, she knew what to do to discourage her daughter from gossiping. "I've seen her have really good friends one year and then the next year they aren't even talking to each other," she says. "I have a feeling things were said, and they don't even know what kind of gossip was passed around."

Queen Bees

What can you do if your teenager is the ringleader of a clique of chicks who gossip? Rosalind Wiseman of Washington, D.C., the author of the New York Times bestseller [Queen Bees and Wannabees: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossip, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence](#) (Three Rivers Press, March 2003), says parents first need to admit that 99.9 percent of people gossip. She says it is not a reflection of poor parenting to admit your daughter's misbehavior.

Wiseman has appeared twice on The Oprah Show to talk about teens and cliques. She says parents need to face reality even if they don't want to believe their child could be mean. "Their denial is for two reasons," Wiseman says. "No one wants to think badly of someone they love. In fact, you always want to put a positive spin on their behavior. And two, your child is a reflection of you, and as such, it is humiliating when your child acts horribly."

Therefore, she always tells parents: "You are not a bad parent if your child is mean, but it is bad parenting if you won't hold your child accountable for mean behavior."

When you overhear your daughter gossiping to friends, wait until you are alone with her. Then question her and have her apologize to the girl, following up later to find out how the apology went.

Profile of a Gossiper

Wiseman describes five signs that might clue parents into the fact that their daughter may be a skilled gossiper:

1. She is really good at saying the right things to adults.
2. She is charming and presents well to parents, teachers and other adults because she needs to slip under the radar.
3. She is socially intelligent.
4. She is highly invested in knowing and being involved in the ups and downs of who is popular.
5. She organizes a birthday party or any party considering every strategy of who should be invited, why and the possible consequences.



The In Crowd

If teens are not part of the "in" crowd, how can parents help them feel included in other ways? Wiseman says the more a child sees her self-worth as tied to things outside of popularity, the more she will have a way to get through her teen years better for the experience. "She will still have experiences that hurt her feelings, but she will have a buffer," Wiseman says. "The only thing is that you have to be really careful that your daughter is involved in an activity that does not replicate these issues as well. Sports teams can be just as bad if the coach is not an excellent leader."

As the president of the Empower Program, Wiseman helps to train teachers, administrators and counselors to implement their "Owning Up" curricula. They reach about 7000 boys and girls every year. Wiseman says in her 12 years working with teenagers, she has found girls learn to please other girls and in doing so will sacrifice what is best for themselves.

"Girls and then women learn to please other girls because they don't want them turning on them," Wiseman says. "It has been similar in every generation. Right now, e-mail is the weapon of choice and parents must set rules for social codes of conduct on e-mail."

Shanterra McBride of Silver Springs, Md., the director of education and programs for the Empower Program, says much of the gossip ricochets off people of different cliques. She says the nature and power of cliques has changed.

"When I was a teen back in 1988, cliques were more about what you did," she says. She remembers cliques in her school were made up of cheerleaders, members of the dance team, skaters (girls who skate-boarded or dated guys who did), ropers (girls who wore roper boots and were into cowboy attire) and punks (girls with purple and yellow hair). "Today's cliques seem to be about who has what as far as socio-economics and popularity," McBride says.

Being a Snoop

Parents should respect their teenager's privacy, right? When it comes to preventing self-injury, gossip or physical violence toward another, parents need to step up to the plate and be the parent, not the friend.

"A lot of parents get confused with the friend, privacy and snoop role," McBride says. "Yes, your teen should be able to talk to you about anything and trust that you're open to dialogue, hence a friend. The privacy issue I know is important because youth need privacy; however, privacy has become overrated." She says parents need to get involved at ground level.

Kampfe also believes parents can take an active role in the schools. In fact, Kampfe is a mentor at her daughter's high school.

McBride says Kampfe is not alone when it comes to discovering a teenager who gossips via Internet. "The Internet has become the new tool for gossip," McBride says. "It used to be three-way phone calls and now it's instant message."

She suggests parents who have discovered their teenager gossiping on the computer discuss doing a random spot check of e-mails every week. "If a teen is the source of nasty gossip in e-mail or in a chat room,



then the parent needs to take away privilege of computer," she says. "Will that stop it? Probably not right away, but you have to start somewhere. Chat rooms can be blocked. Parents have to just read their manuals on how to block them. They have to take the extra step."

Keeping It Real

Teenage girls are not the only ones who gossip. McBride says boys also gossip, but they tend to gossip about girls' behavior because they don't understand it.

Finally, McBride says it is important for parents to understand their teenagers will mimic their behavior. One of the best ways parents can prevent the spread of nasty rumors is by setting a good example. Keep negative thoughts about the crazy next-door neighbor or the overweight bank teller to yourself. Teach your daughter the art of apology and how to confront others. If she knows who is responsible for the rumor, she should let the person know there is a real person behind the rumors.

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