

There comes a time in most relationships when information needs to be shared that is less than fun to talk about. For adults it can be that ‘secret’ we don’t like to share unless forced to, or at least until the relationship has become important enough to warrant our sharing. For children it can be telling an adult about something they think might be wrong, yet might also land them in trouble. Some examples for kids might be; turning in a bully, telling on a friend that’s planning to do something wrong (steal, cheat on a test, leave school grounds), notifying adults of drug/alcohol use, or confessing to their own mistake.

Encouraging our kids to share this information can be quite a challenging task. Yet a task most of us would agree is quite important. How we react to our children when they bring us news is going to have a huge impact on how comfortable they feel coming to us with bigger problems. By the time our kids are 7-8 years old many of them have already started to figure out that some things are just better left unsaid. For example if the consequence for bad behaviour is the same whether one lies or tells the truth, our child might as well lie and hope they are never found out.

As the adult dealing with the situation, always provide some sort of benefit for telling the truth. If we don’t provide incentive from a child’s perspective telling the truth is simply not worth it.

This is also the age when our kid’s sense of self-worth starts to shift from a family focus to what their peers think about them. Already they start to understand the unspoken code: ratting on a classmate, a bully, or a friend, can have very negative consequences.

Tattling: Getting someone into trouble	Telling: Getting someone out of trouble/danger
--	--

Two important things then that we need to teach our kids are; it’s always in your favor to tell the truth and there is a difference between tattling (ratting) and telling. To help our kids learn it is safe to share with us (and resist the code) we must work to avoid the many traps that break down relationship trust. Here’s a few examples:

Avoid: Overreaction	“What! There was alcohol at the party!” or “This is serious... I’m phoning the school first thing tomorrow and demanding they do something about this!”
Try to: Stay calm	“This sounds important, I’m glad you’re sharing it with me – please continue.” Or “This sounds pretty serious, I’m thinking I might have to phone the school... what do you think?”
Avoid: Demanding answers Threats	“Who did it? You need to tell me right now so I can let the coach know!” “Tell me who did it or you will suffer the consequences!”
Try to: Encourage information	“I think you’re trying to protect your friend. I can understand that, loyalty is a great quality to have. In this case you would actually be helping your friend by telling me who it is. I can’t promise nothing will happen to him/her, but I can ask the school to promise not to tell where the information came from.”
Avoid: Sarcasm	“What do you mean you didn’t mean to hit him? You’re arm just swung out all on its own?!” or “Right... the MP3 just magically fell out of his backpack into yours!”
Try to: Clarify	“Let’s see if I understand this right... you hit him by accident?” or “So you’re backpack was sitting beside his backpack without anyone around it. How do you think his MP3 got into your bag then?”

*Voice and facial expression are important – be sure to use a calm, non-judgmental voice and demeanor
A simple guideline I like to use is, “Am I being respectful? Would I talk this way to a friend?”
When it comes to sharing tough stuff, we all need to be clearly heard. The safer we make the environment anyone is sharing in, the more likely the conversation will happen.

Sometimes, despite our great work, kids neglect to share something ‘worthy of mention’. When this happens, try not to be offended and instead let the child know that this would have been a good thing to share. It’s not always easy to know what falls on that ‘sharing’ list. Our kids can’t possibly tell us all that they see and hear in a day and for that we can be grateful.

Debbie Pokornik is the owner of empowering NRG. She is the author of *Peak at Parenting; Natural, Realistic Guidance for the Busy Parent* (releasing late 2009) and believes all parents can use support at some point in their parenting experience. For other great parenting tips or to book Debbie for keynotes/workshops, go to <http://empoweringnrg.com>