

What Kinds of Secrets Are Okay for Children to Keep And What Kinds Are Not?

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One of Kidpower's boundary rules is that: "Problems should not be secret!" To help prevent potential problems, we also tell children that, "Touch should not be a secret. And presents someone gives you or games someone asks you to play should not be a secret."

Often during our adult education programs, parents approach us and ask about how to explain to their children what kinds of secrets are okay to keep and what are not. As one puzzled father said, "My seven-year-old daughter 'Pricilla' has so much fun whispering about harmless secrets with her friends. If I tell her not to keep any kind of secrets, she'll just keep the fact that she has these secrets a secret from me!"



Here are some guidelines that can help.

1) As soon as children are old enough to understand, teach them about safe secrets and unsafe secrets.

Common secrets that are safe to keep:

- Surprise birthday parties that everybody knows about except one person, who is going to find out
- Gifts that are going to be opened at a special occasion, at which point they won't be secrets anymore
- Fun games with kids your age that don't break your safety rules, don't leave other kids out, and don't involve saying bad things about others
- Gossip about family or friends unless this is about something that worries you, in which case you should tell an adult you trust

Secrets that are NOT safe to:

- Any kind of touch
- Games that might break your safety rules or that might be hurtful to anyone
- Presents that other people give you or favors that they do for you
- Anything that bothers you

In the situation mentioned above, Pricilla's father can use times when his seven-year-old is whispering secrets to her friends as a teaching opportunity by asking leading questions in a playful lighthearted way. His goal is to show that he is a safe adult to talk to, while helping his daughter develop some assessment tools about secrets.

For example, Pricilla's father might say, "I see you are having fun whispering secrets with your friends. I'll bet you already know what makes secrets safe for everyone and about what kinds of secrets are not safe. Is anyone getting hurt by your secret because you are leaving someone out or saying bad things about someone? ... Good! Because secrets that hurt people are not safe secrets. Is this a secret about a problem that anyone is having? ... Good! Because problems should never be secrets. Is this a secret about breaking the safety rules? ... Good! Because of course breaking the safety rules is not safe! ... Is this a secret about touch or about presents someone is giving you? ... Good! Because touch should not have to be a secret and neither should presents someone gives you! Thank you for telling me!"

2) Don't allow or expect toddlers and preschoolers to keep any kind of secrets.

Very young children are best off having a clear "no secrets" rule. They are too literal to understand about some secrets being safe to keep and some secrets being not safe to keep.

This means that adults should not say things where young children can hear them that they do not want them to repeat to others. Don't complain about your Aunt Flossie's bad breath to your friend on the phone as your three-year-old plays quietly nearby unless you are okay with your child telling Aunt Flossie, "My Daddy says that you have bad breath!" Expecting a young child to know why personal comments like these are not public information would be confusing and unfair.

3) When they can understand, teach children about privacy and confidentiality.

As they develop more comprehension, children can understand the concept that their problems should not be secrets, but that there are times to respect the privacy of others by not discussing everything that happens within a family in public.

You can use daily events to help define the rules. For example, "Yes, I know you think it is funny that your little sister peed her pants and made a puddle on the floor because she was so busy playing with her blocks. Is there anything about what happened that worries you? ... Good! Since this is not a problem for you, please don't gossip about it with your friends – and please don't tease your sister about what happened. No one's health or safety is at risk, and your sister has the right to her privacy."

Children can learn a great deal by developing an understanding of confidentiality. When my sister, brother, and I were older, my parents wanted to be able to talk freely about the daily interactions on their jobs. This meant that we would hear things about their co-workers that were not appropriate for us to mention to our friends, who were often children of the people my parents were talking about. This information was not confidential in a professional way, but it was private on a personal level.

My parents devised a term called "family confidential" that meant that we would not gossip about what was discussed at the dinner table. This was fine, because what was being discussed was not about problems for us and was not about safety for anyone.

Be careful when discussing "family confidential" issues to focus on problem-solving. To set a good example as adults, we want to avoid venting in front of children in ways that use insults to describe the intentions, actions, looks, culture, or character of others. If we want children to learn healthy relationship-building skills, we need to communicate about others in ways that are compassionate and respectful even if we are upset about someone's behavior or disagree with this person's choices.

4) When privacy about a problem is important for a family, make sure that children have several adults who they can tell about anything that worries them and find ways they can say something to their friends.

Real-life questions about secrets can often be complicated. The mother of a ten-year-old boy that we'll call Louis explained their family's problem, "My husband has multiple sclerosis and would like to have a feeling of privacy about details that are sometimes involved in his care. He would prefer that his personal struggle not be a subject of conversation among people he sees socially through our son's school. How can we teach Louis when he can talk about what happens in our family and when it's not okay with us?"

"I can understand that you want to protect your husband's privacy as much as possible," I said. "My concern is that, when one family member has a serious health problem, this affects everyone else in the family. Louis is almost certainly worried about his father, which means this means these issues are a problem for him. He needs permission to talk with at least one adult who is not in the family about all his feelings about everything that is going on with his father. You can discuss with Louis what kinds of people both of you can trust to respect the confidentiality of your family while giving him a safe space to talk about his feelings. You can get a referral from your doctor or the hospital social worker about professional counseling resources."

"What about his friends?" Louis's mother asked.

"If you are worried about what Louis might say to his friends, you can discuss ways that he can be honest about what is going on in his life without going into details," I explained. "Otherwise, Louis can end up with the burden of being unable to talk with people he sees every day about something that is huge in his life – or feeling guilty because he couldn't keep everything to himself. It might be a great relief to Louis to be given permission at least to say to his friends, 'I'm sad today because my Dad is having a hard time. I don't want to say more right now, but I wish he felt better.'"

5) Because these issues are complex, look for opportunities to keep discussing secrets, privacy, and confidentiality with the children in your life.

Literature and movies can be great ways to get discussions going as characters in books, on television and in the media often make very unsafe choices. Did any of the characters keep secrets? Was this a good idea or not? Did any of the characters gossip in hurtful ways? What might they have done instead?

You can act situations out, using people, puppets, or even daily objects to show different kinds of problems and solutions about keeping secrets, about gossiping, about protecting privacy, and about finding safe adults to talk with.

Kidpower has a wealth of resources for how to use People Safety skills and ideas to prevent problems and build healthy relationships. For more information, please visit our website at www.kidpower.org.