

How Do I Avoid the Gossip Swirl?

When we have safety concerns about an adult who interacts with children, it is important for us to communicate our concerns to someone with the authority to address those concerns. Our proper response is to communicate our concerns to the person whose behavior is a concern or to that person's supervisor. However, we often avoid confrontation with the person we *are concerned about*, and we instead talk *about that person* to our friends and family. Then we find ourselves in the middle of a swirl of gossip—a swirl and habit from which it is hard to escape.

The dictionary defines “gossip” as: A person who habitually spreads intimate or private rumors or facts. Once gossip starts, it is almost impossible to stop it or to repair the damage it causes. We say that we are merely interested in “what’s going on with people,” or that we are curious about “what’s happening in people’s lives,” or that we just get pulled into gossiping “without even thinking about it.”

If we truly want to eliminate gossip and its harmful effects from our environment, there is one rule we can adopt and apply in every area of our lives: **Stop listening to complaints that you can’t do anything about.**

Think about how much time you spend listening to complaints, thinking about what you were just told, and wondering how it will get resolved. Complaining is almost a national pastime. We complain about everything from the weather to the price of gasoline. We complain to almost anyone who will listen—and the problem is that so many people are willing to listen that the complaint grows and festers and takes on a life of its own.

Your decision to stop listening to complaints you can’t do anything about has several positive effects:

- People learn to stop dumping their complaints and concerns on your doorstep.
- You no longer waste precious time wondering and worrying about things you can do nothing about.
- You are not participating in conversations that can do irreparable harm to the reputations of good people.
- You are not dealing with guilt over participating in gossip about another person.

When you decide to stop listening to complaints that you can’t resolve, it will be necessary to educate those around you about your new rules for communication between you and them. However, your conversation about this new guideline for life can be relatively simple, and it does not need to leave the other person feeling bad or ashamed. When someone begins to tell you about a complaint for which you have no power to address, simply state the following:

“Excuse me, but is this a complaint that I can do something about? If not, you should know that I recently decided to stop listening to complaints that I cannot do anything about. So, is there something else you’d like to talk about instead?”

Once you adopt this rule it will take a while for the people around you to get used to this new concept. But, if you are persistent and refuse to discuss any complaint or concern that you can’t directly do something about, people will get the message—and they won’t be offended by your unwillingness to participate in their gossip. They will understand that you are not judging them or the validity of their complaint. You are just declining to participate in gossip about an issue over which you have no control.

Bottom Line:

Child sexual abuse is a big problem in our society. While the facts and allegations have too often gone unreported, gossip has frequently spiraled out of control, fueling fears and failing to lead to an appropriate response.

Listening to complaints that that you can’t do anything about does nothing to produce a positive outcome; and, in fact, it keeps the complaint alive—festering and unresolved—and it

destroys reputations, doing irreparable harm to good people, which often includes the victims of sex abuse, rape, and other physically violent and sex-related crimes. Declining to participate in gossip will produce great benefits for you and those around you, not the least of which is your own peace of mind.

So, when you are approached with gossip about sex abuse or other similar types of wrongdoing, or if you find yourself participating in gossip related to those topics, the best thing you can do is stop the gossip and start reporting your concerns and suspicions to those in a position to take action to stop the abuse.

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