

BACK TO SCHOOL: SECRETS

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Nothing makes us so lonely as our secrets. —Paul Tornier, MD

“I’ve got a secret, I’ve got a secret!” Nearly everyone can remember hearing this being sung out by other kids (or maybe ourselves) when we were younger. It seems that those early secrets could not be held back and someone, anyone, had to be told or we would burst. It was even the title of an adult game show in the 1950s where celebrity panelists tried to determine a contestant's "secret" that was something unusual, amazing, embarrassing or humorous.

The secrets I am referring to, however, are the ones held by children and adults who are so deeply shamed by something that happened to them that they can't bear to utter the words aloud to anyone. These dark secrets chain a person to sadness, anxiety and depression. They bind a person to something invisible, yet overpoweringly voluminous and ugly. The secret becomes bigger than the person themselves and overshadows everything they do. In moments of happiness, their minds wander to dark places of unworthiness, fear and dread. They worry that others will find out their secret and the world will know how ugly they are. They hide in darkness and sometimes drag others into their darkness.

This darkness is a place of confusion and unknowing. It is a lonely place where people feel trapped and doomed. Even when everything else is going right, keeping the secret of abuse makes one feel constantly at unrest, never at peace and always fearful. It is really a horrible way to live. Most especially when children keep secrets, they feel they have nowhere to turn, no place to go. The adults who abused them rely on this and manipulate them to feel bad, guilty and responsible for what has happened to them.

It is back to school time and children everywhere are returning to the classroom. There is no better time of year to review the important family rules that help to keep all children and vulnerable adults safe. It takes just a few moments to review with your children (from an early age onward and through adolescence) what to do in an emergency, who the special, safe adults in their life are and the importance of not keeping secrets. Discussing bullying, safe and unsafe touch and what to do when you feel unsafe or scared should be done in small "sound bite" type conversations that you have often with children.

Here is some helpful information to assist you with these conversations:

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

Common secrets that are safe to keep (these can also be referred to as “surprises” to avoid confusion):

- 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

Secrets that are NOT safe to keep:

- Any kind of unsafe or inappropriate 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, even if they tell you not to tell anyone
- Anything that bothers you¹

Remember that talking with and listening to your children and the children in your care is the most important thing you do each day. Relish this time and use every opportunity (large or small) to impart your values and what you hold to be important.

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