# **School gossip is not trivial, but a form of bullying**

**Source : Tanu Shree Singh, Author & Psychologist**

“I hate school.”

“Whoa, what? Again?”

I can probably write a book on 101 reasons why kids hate school. The reasons range from timing to homework to the canteen food. Sometimes, however, things get serious.

“Can’t I be friends with a girl? The kids in my class have been gossiping about us. It gets very embarrassing and annoying. I have even started avoiding her now.” The younger one came back one day many years ago, visibly distressed.

It is more common than we think or acknowledge. We assume innocence. “Children cannot be that manipulative,” “It must be a misunderstanding” and more such invalid justifications are sought to put a lid on “such trivial matters”.

A girl I know nearly stopped playing basketball since the other girls in the class used to spread rumours about her.School gossip is not trivial. It is very much a form of bullying since it is a tool used to intimidate, hurt or isolate an individual. So how do we help our child in coping with gossip?

## **Listen**

A lot of times we are too busy crawling through the day to stop and listen. There is homework to be dealt with, classes to be arranged, meals, school uniforms, bills — life gets overwhelming. But then we need to take time out to listen. Sometimes, it could be an inane, detailed description of whatever transpired in the lunch break. These seemingly meaningless conversations are the stepping stones to the ones where the children need us. If they have not talked to us about insignificant things, they will not talk about the important ones. So listen, always.

## **Never trivialise or judge**

A lot of times, we brush aside conversations where the child is bothered by gossip. “Tch, don’t bother. Life has way more serious troubles than harmless gossip” — this sentence does not help. Neither does, “there is never smoke without fire. Are you sure you didn’t give them fodder?”

Yes, it might be trivial considering life does get tough as we grow older. But for the child it is not insignificant. And saying there is a deeper wound ahead helps neither in dealing with the current pain nor does it prepare for the future.

Also, laying an accusation or judging is the perfect strategy for making sure that the child does not express her anxiety or hurt again. So please refrain. As a first step, listen empathetically.

## **Take the mind off it**

Just saying, “don’t give it much thought,” does nothing. While listening and helping the child deal with it is important, it is also essential that we help them take their mind off it. Plan an outing, indulge in art together, get them involved around the house, enrol them for the guitar class they have been wanting to go to — whatever fits the bill. Also convince the child to avoid the usual channels of gossip — the social media. This helps the child in putting a sort of emotional distance between the gossip and self, thereby enabling objective thinking.

## **Teach confrontation strategies**

“Just ignore.” That is one of the standard responses we give. Though it might work quite a few times, it seldom works when the gossip gets vicious or doesn’t end.

This does not mean that the child needs to go and beat the living daylights out of the other child! It simply means we need to teach our children to confront effectively.

* Tell the child to calmly go and tell the child spreading the rumours that it is not okay.
* Indulge in role play. Get the child to practice their words with you.
* Encourage the child to do the same when they hear rumours about others.
* The child needs to tell the bully that they would be reported if they do not stop.
* Discuss all possible outcomes of this confrontation and think of effective responses.

These exercises help the children in not only facing the current crisis, but also enable them to work out solutions in the future without getting verbally or physically violent.

## **Stay calm**

Again, it is easier said than done. They are our babies after all. But getting agitated will not help. We need to be supportive and need to be able to help the child deal with it himself. Keep the fighter instinct away. Step in only if you feel things are not resolving. Also, if you decide to take it in your hands, the same rules apply. Remember, most of the behaviour that children learn is through modelling. They watch us and learn. So effective and rational confrontation strategies apply to us too.

## **Watch out for emotional distress**

Sometimes, gossip can take its toll and leave scars on a child. Be watchful. Do not hesitate in seeking the help of a counsellor if you see behavioural changes, sudden fall in grades, loss of interest in school, change in sleeping and eating patterns, etc. Not all battles are won alone. Some require help. And it is okay to get help from experts. Cases of children getting scarred for life thanks to school gossip are far more common than we would like to believe.

## **Dealing with online gossip**

Online gossip can be tough to deal with. Save proofs and report to school immediately if the child is a victim of online gossip. Apart from all the other strategies, talk to the child about the perils of putting too much information out there that could make them easy targets. Also, a balance needs to be strictly maintained between online and offline life with the scales tipping in favour of offline interactions. Children today are at a high risk of relying heavily on online interactions to the sad exclusion of real life ones. Hence, online gossip can be far more harmful than the real one. It is a good idea to also discuss the cyber laws with children for them to understand the seriousness of the medium.

## **Do not encourage**

Lastly, do not encourage. The same rules apply when the child comes and shares gossip about other classmates. We cannot be interested in what child A said about B and then get worked up when B is our own child. A good way of letting them know that you take gossiping seriously is by not indulging in it. When the child knows that you do not like it, the chances of them reporting if it happens to them,are much higher.

The younger one was hugged, his story heard and then once he was calm we tried to figure out what was more important, his friendship or other children who were probably jealous of their relationship? He stopped reacting to gossip as a first step and did not let it affect his friendship. Luckily for him, this strategy worked. If it hadn’t, he would have confronted the kids spreading rumours. If that had backfired, he would have gone to the teacher. If all else had failed, he would have used his sure-fire ammunition — his mum.

The girl did not leave basketball. She decided to steel up and keep dribbling despite the snickers and whispers. She glared back at some, talked to others and ignored quite a few.

Both kids had one thing in common: they had their parents supporting and understanding them. Sometimes, that is all that they need.