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Telling Tales

How to keep your kid from becoming a tattler

BY **MARJORIE INGALL** | 7:00 am Jan 4, 2010



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“Mom! Max is trying to put a booger on me!”

“Mom! Josie won’t let me play fairies with her!”

And so it goes. I’d like to tell you that time off from school means time spent baking gluten-free organic muffins and jamming joyfully with our family bluegrass band. But not so much. Intensive togetherness in our house means whining.

In *Émile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau described the “original perfect nature” of the child. To him, spending time with children necessitated respecting their inherent harmony and wholeness; the very first line in the book is “God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil.” During the “age of nature,” Rousseau claimed, or ages 2 to 12, a child should receive no moral instruction at all. “The mind should be left undisturbed till its faculties have developed,” Rousseau wrote, believing that it’s not until adolescence that children are actually able to reason.

Of course, Rousseau dumped his own five illegitimate children in orphanages, so what did he know? And the way mine are behaving right now, I’m tempted to follow his example.

But what if we look at what Rousseau *said* rather than what he did? Are our children indeed perfect little noble savages, blank slates for us to screw up? Does that make it impossible for them to understand the mixed messages we send—for example, when it comes to tattling vs. telling? After all, from the time they were tiny, we’ve been instructing them to come to us when they have a problem. Don’t use your fists, we say, tell me what’s bothering you. But by the time they’re in kindergarten, our message has changed: Work it out yourself. Don’t be a tattletale. Surely this is an example of Rousseau-ian messing with our children’s perfect nature.

Judaism, of course, has its own take: tattling is a facet of *lashon hara*, “evil language.” *Lashon hara*, the Talmud says, is sinful to engage in even if it’s true. (And make no mistake: tattling usually *is* true. Researchers have found that children who tattle are telling the truth 90 percent of the time, says Ashley Merryman, co-author of *Nurtureshock: New Thinking About Children*^[1]. According to the Talmud, *lashon hara* harms three people: the speaker, the listener, and the person being spoken about. That’s certainly true of tattling. Look at famed Torah tattler Joseph, of Technicolor Dreamcoat repute. In Genesis 37, we learn how Joseph was tending the sheep with his brothers, and brought his father a “bad report” about them. (Was it true? We don’t know, and it doesn’t matter.) Along with his annoying tendency to share dreams in which he looked awesome and his brothers didn’t, Joseph’s run-to-daddy tendencies led to him being sold into slavery. Coatless. His family wound up starving and his father thought he was dead. Tattling did indeed harm the speaker, the listener, and the one tattled-upon.

But look at it from Joseph’s perspective. “According to observational studies of siblings,” says Merryman, “for every time a kid tattled to a parent, he had 14 other disagreements with his sibling or transgressions that he *didn’t* complain about.” I bet that was true of Joseph. His 10 older brothers, aware of who their dad’s favorite was, were probably picking on him constantly out in the sheep-tending fields. Jacob may not have blamed Joseph for tattling, but we’re not Jacob. In our real-life modern-day world, according to one researcher, we’re 10 times more likely to chastise a child for tattling as to chide a child for lying.

“Parents think ‘no tattling’ means ‘try to work it out on your own, but if you can’t, or if you have a real problem, then come to me,’” says Merryman. But kids often think they have tried to work it out on their own, and still we dismiss them. Thus, “kids turn ‘don’t be a tattletale’ into ‘don’t tell me the truth when you have a problem.’”

We have to help kids navigate these shoals, because the social consequences of being perceived as a tattler can be dire. “A child who repeatedly goes to the teacher after, say, second grade or so, will be socially ostracized by other children, considered more immature, considered unable to hang with the peer group,” says Erika Rich, a child psychologist in Los Angeles, points out. “Tattling becomes a social deficit.”

And a culture with a full-on “tattlers suck” ethos can have dangerous implications. One study found that among fourth and fifth

graders, tattling is considered as serious a transgression as theft or property damage, says Merryman. And this worldview leads to the “Stop Snitching” movement, which encourages citizens not to cooperate with police. (Though to be fair, many police informants do seem to be motivated by self-interest. According to a study by Northwestern University Law School’s Center on Wrongful Convictions, informants are responsible for 46 percent of wrongful capital convictions from false testimony. They may be motivated by cash or by a plea bargain.) Rick Frei, a professor of psychology at Community College of Philadelphia, has created [The Snitching Project](#)^[2], a study of community attitudes toward police cooperation. He has found that people were more afraid of damage to their reputation than of physical retribution if they talked to police. (They were also more likely to cooperate when a victim was elderly or a child and less likely when a victim was a drug dealer.) But back in my house, with its non-criminal (but very annoying) tattling and whining, I need help surviving this vacation and beyond. The key is to be explicit about my expectations, say the experts.

“Up until first grade, you want kids to utilize adults as problem-solvers, because they’re still learning how to problem-solve,” says Rich. “We provide modeling. We have to teach them the correct strategies. Then by first or second grade, it’s important to help them make the shift into problem-solving themselves. It’s time to have a conversation: This is a new expectation I have for you. You need to come tell me if there’s danger, to you or to others, but if there isn’t, try to work through this on your own.”

When my kids run to me with a glass-shattering wail, I might say, “Wow, how have you tried to handle it?” or “What’s your motivation in coming to me?” or “Is this an emergency?” (As my friend Paula used to say, “Is there blood? Is it arterial?”). [Mary Beth Hewitt](#)^[3], an educator who specializes in children with challenging behaviors, recommends that we recognize kids’ attempts to use words to solve problems and reinforce the positive facets of their attempts. Then we can help them refine their attempts (“Another way to say that might be...”). We can empathize with their feelings (“That makes you really mad, huh?”), ask what they’ve tried and what else they could try, and offer alternatives.

“Your job is to raise capable children,” says [Bill Corbett](#)^[4], a parenting educator and author of *Love, Limits & Lessons*. “To do that, they need to take accountability for the problem. Ninety-nine percent of the problem is emotionally based—they feel left out or angry—and a parent can help them develop the emotional intelligence to deal with it by directing him to talk about the feelings. Generally, with repeat tattling, you just say ‘Really? Wow!’ Most parents have gone overboard in solving problems for their kids—we’ve raised a generation of kids who say, ‘I can’t do it myself; you do it for me.’”

To help a kid distinguish between tattling and telling, snitching and being a responsible member of a democracy, Corbett says, “Acknowledge that the child has brought you the problem. In doing so, you teach a kid ‘I did the right thing by going to Dad.’ Concentrate on the relationship: You have the right to tell me anything, but I have the right to take action or not.” (Shari Storm, author of *Motherhood is the New MBA: Using Your Parenting Skills to be a Better Boss*^[5], offers a shorthand: “Are you telling me this to get someone *in* to trouble or to get someone *out* of trouble?”)

All the experts agree: the very word “tattling” is bad news. “We shouldn’t have it in our parental vocabulary,” says Corbett. Merryman concurs. “Since I learned about this research, I never call a kid a tattletale,” she says. “I would much rather have kids come to me when they feel they need to than set a pattern where they expect I will criticize them for asking for help.”

But back to our pal Rousseau: I’m not sure my kids’ savagery is so noble. But I also don’t see them as empty vessels, ready to be filled (even after their bat mitzvahs, *bien sur*) with my civilizing parental wisdom. Alas, with child-rearing, as with discerning the difference between tattling and helping, nuance is where it’s at. Shades of gray can be irksome when you’re trying to keep to a word count, but that’s life. And parenthood.

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[1] *Nurtureshock: New Thinking About Children*: <http://www.amazon.com/Nurtureshock-New-Thinking-About-Children/dp/0446504122>

[2] Center on Wrongful Convictions, informants are responsible for 46 percent of wrongful capital convictions from false testimony. They may be motivated by cash or by a plea bargain.) Rick Frei, a professor of psychology at Community College of Philadelphia, has created [The Snitching Project](#): <http://www.law.northwestern.edu/wrongfulconvictions>

[3] Mary Beth Hewitt: <http://www.behavioradvisor.com/Tattling.html>

[4] Bill Corbett: <http://www.billcorbett.vpweb.com/default.html>

[5] *Motherhood is the New MBA: Using Your Parenting Skills to be a Better Boss*: http://www.amazon.com/Motherhood-New-MBA-Parenting-Skills/dp/0312544316/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1251818467&sr=8-1

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