



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

## Communication

"I won't allow a poster of a child molester in my daughter's bedroom," declared a mom in my office. "He was proven innocent," responded 9 year old Amy.

In death as in life, Michael Jackson evokes responses ranging from adulation to disgust.

Since neither mom nor daughter had observed two months of court testimony and listened to over 100 witnesses at the Jackson trial, I tried to interpret the court decision. "A verdict of 'not guilty' is not the same as being proven innocent," I explained to Amy.

"While Jackson's behavior was extremely unusual, he was never convicted of any sexual offenses against children," I reminded the mom.

Silly me. My observations were totally ineffective with both mom and daughter. This was all about feelings and perceptions, not facts. Amy quoted lyrics from Jackson's song "You Are Not Alone," speaking as if she was invoking divine inspiration. Mom stared at Amy in disbelief, wondering why her daughter was reciting such trite gibberish.

For Amy, Jackson's songs spoke to her with an intensity and honesty that she had never experienced in her young life. His music represented everything that was absent from her world. He sang of peace and acceptance in vivid contrast to Amy's world of turmoil and rejection. Amy felt a love in his music that she felt nowhere else.

For Amy's mom, Jackson was the representation of all that was wrong with our worship of celebrities. "Being a popular singer doesn't give you permission to molest little boys," she emphasized to her daughter.

Family therapy sessions are all about trying to get kids and parents to permit themselves to understand each other's worlds. I challenged Amy to think of herself as a parent of a young child. Perhaps her mom was totally wrong in her judgment of Jackson. Even so, shouldn't mom's feelings

about such an intense issue of sexual abuse be respected? How could any parent tolerate a poster of a pedophile overlooking their child's bed?

I asked mom to listen to some of Jackson's music and watch his videos. He has connected to millions of people, including Amy. Why? I wasn't expecting Mom to appreciate the dancing, enjoy the music, or condone Jackson's lifestyle. I was asking her simply to enter her child's world and try to understand life from that perspective.

Mom and daughter eventually arrived at a compromise. The poster was taken down but Amy put up smaller pictures around her desk. More importantly, they agreed to daily "talk time" to discuss routine stuff. Mom promised that during these times she would neither criticize nor correct Amy. In turn, her daughter agreed that whenever there was a dispute she'd verbalize her mom's point of view before expressing her own.

We live in very different worlds from our children. Their thoughts, feelings, values and perceptions may leave us feeling as strangers in their worlds. Understanding their lives can be difficult and disconcerting, but it's an effort worth taking.

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