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By

Don't Tell My Parents!

“Just before I go to bed, I pray to Jesus that I’ll get cancer or something like that,” said 9-year-old Katie. She reasoned that if she got really sick, then her parents would have to get back together to take care of her. Katie’s mom had moved out of the house about six months ago, and the effect on this little girl was devastating.

“They tell me that it’s not my fault, but they are just trying to make me feel good. I caused lots of problems, and Mom couldn’t take it any more,” she said. In reality, Katie was an extremely well behaved youngster. The parents’ divorce was somehow related to the fact that they both wanted to “find themselves.”

My first session with Katie was intense, as she talked about bits of conversation she had overheard from her parents about the separation. Katie’s world was in turmoil. She was hurt, confused, and had so many misunderstandings about what was really going on in her family. At the end of our session, Katie seemed noticeably relieved.

“I’m so glad we were able to talk today. You did really well,” I said. Katie smiled and gave me a hug. “It sure would be nice if you could talk like this with your parents. They love you and are very concerned about you.”

“Please don’t tell them what I said!” Katie exclaimed. “You promised! They would get so mad!”

I reassured Katie that we had a deal, made with her parents’ full support. With only a few exceptions, whatever we discussed in our session would remain confidential.

"Don't tell my parents." I hear those words frequently in my office. Here is what's confusing. Katie's parents are caring and concerned people who want to understand and help their troubled daughter. Even so, Katie's inner world remains off limits to the two most important people in her life.

Why would children talk with a stranger like me rather than share their world with people who love and care for them?

One of the reasons is the fact children are not emotionally connected to a professional, and therefore have the freedom to express their true feelings without having to worry about upsetting us. Katie loves her parents. One of the reasons she is scared of talking with them is that she doesn't want to hurt them. She knows her parents are having their own problems, and Katie is trying to protect them in a way. By keeping her feelings to herself, Katie hopes she'll be less of a burden to her overwhelmed parents.

Therapists do something else that most parents have a hard time doing. We listen. We try to understand, and experience the world from a child's perspective.

Most parents make an attempt at listening, but then quickly try to reassure, correct and make things better. Here's the paradox. In trying to rush in and help their children, parents end up making things worse by shutting down communication.

When Katie expressed her feelings that she knew she was the cause of the divorce, I could have quickly corrected those misperceptions. Timing is everything in communication. My intent would have been positive, but Katie would have experienced my remarks as a denial of her feelings. I suspect the rest of the session would have gone quite differently, and Katie would have been reluctant to say much more for fear of being corrected.

At the right time, and with the help of her wonderful parents, we did talk about the divorce. Katie did come to a more accurate understanding of what was really going on. The key was not only what was said, but when and how.

Communicating isn't just about talking, but about listening. If you want to communicate with your children (and others!), try talking less and listening more. Don't jump in too quickly to make things better and correct others' points of view. Your children may then allow you to enter their world, and that may be one of the most rewarding experiences you can have as a parent.

Gregory Ramey, PhD, is a child psychologist and vice president for outpatient services at The Children's Medical Center of Dayton. For more columns by Dr. Ramey, visit the Dayton Children's website at www.childrensdayton.org and sign up for *FamilyWise*, a free e-newsletter for parents.