

Being Afraid of Listening to our Kids and Its Impact on Bullying and Suicide

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Unfortunately, we are often afraid to speak and listen to our kids. Issues related to bullying and suicide are, in part, symptomatic of our fear to communicate directly to our children about who they are, what is on their minds, what is important to them, and, maybe, how we might help. Sometimes it is not about doing or saying anything but just listening.

I am not suggesting that recent terrible events related to bullying and suicide are parents' fault. Parenting, like psychoanalysis, like politics or teaching, is an impossible profession, filled with ups and downs, joy and stress, and often impossible situations to manage.

It can be scary to seriously and honestly listen to one and other, much less our kids. Listening demands putting one's initial or gut reactions aside. ***Listening to our children is about a genuine wish to understand something about what they are thinking and feeling from their perspective, not ours.***

Whether we are parents of the perpetrators or victims of bullying, something has gone terribly wrong at home. The extreme example was Columbine. We can only wonder how and why their parents were completely unaware of what was happening to their sons as they collected weapons in their bedrooms, and slowly regressed toward isolation, rage, and finally, murder.

Often our kids are afraid to come home and tell us they are being bullied. They are ashamed. They are nervous we will react to our own fears and somehow make things worse for them. They keep it to themselves until they can no longer manage the pain and isolation and imagine suicide as the only way out. Sometimes our kids hide their depression and resulting helplessness, isolation and anger.

Those gorges at Cornell become the deathbeds of students, with incredible ACT scores and grades in high school, who were afraid to let those around them--parents, teachers, friends, and others know that something dark was looming by the time they arrived in Ithaca. Building fences around those gorges is a band aid. ***Real parental listening is the cure.***

In our Analytic Service to Adolescents Program, an in-school treatment and research program at Morton Alternative High School in Cicero, Illinois, our students have taught us the following:

-No matter how much they deny it students want their parents involved in their lives.

-When given an opportunity to speak of what is troubling them in group and individual treatment, students talk of their ambitions, their concerns, their wish for their lives to be better.

-When unable to find adults to listen, students describe depression, anxiety and stress that leads to drug abuse, gang involvement (where being “listened to” comes at a high price), poor school performance and worse.

-Our best performing students are those whose parents let themselves become involved—support their students at school, participate in parenting workshops, and address problems in their own lives.

Our parents describe how hard it is to sit down and have their child talk of their anger and disappointment at home, and their fears at school and on the streets. Parents discuss how their own adolescent upheaval contributes to discomfort in listening to their sons and daughters.

Adolescent development demands coming to terms with parents’ limitations, as the adolescent comes to terms with his or her own limitations. Identity, self-esteem, and the wish move forward toward adulthood, are fragile at best. Our kids need us to help them through no matter how provocative, quiet, private, or angry their behavior may be.

Although there are many troubled kids out there who could benefit from professional help, the best place to receive the kind of help that moves kids forward is right in the home. ***Supporting parents in their efforts to listen to their children may be one of the critical ways to address bullying, suicide and other frightening realities that are disrupting the safety and well-being of our children.***