Telling takes courage

“Young people, you have it in you to shout…. Even if others keep quiet, if we older people and leaders keep quiet, if the whole world keeps quiet and loses its joy, I ask you: Will you cry out?”
– Pope Francis

In August, Pope Francis condemned sexual abuse and its cover-up and called all Catholics to join in ending it. But standing up can be scary, difficult or even dangerous. Here are four ways to help your kids find their voices, even when silence seems easier.

Telling Takes Courage

“Snitch.” “Tattletale.” “Narc.” From the nicknames we give, to the backlash we exact, our society goes out of its way to teach our kids that whistle blowers are true villains. What gets missed is that making waves takes more courage than keeping still. Kids want to do the right thing, so helping them feel brave, supported and right when they point out little wrongs can go a long way toward making sure they don’t clam up if and when more serious things come up.

Might for Right

We joke in our house that the “three little words” we value most aren’t “I love you,” but are “You are right.” I asked my 10-year-old daughter what keeps her from speaking up. “I usually do speak up,” she told me. So, I asked her why. “Being confident in the answer – like, if you know two plus two equals four – makes it a lot easier.” Being sure that their answers are correct – that the trusted adults in their lives will believe and act on them – gives kids the courage to be bold when we most want and need them to be.

Privacy, Secrets and Lies

My kids and I put things we would rather keep to ourselves into three categories: privacy, secrets and lies. I try to teach them that they're entitled to privacy, that secrets can be dangerous, and that lies are unacceptable. What's private is none of my business, and they shouldn't feel funny about that. But if they're keeping secrets from me, they need to ask themselves why. And if they're lying about it, something is very wrong. This vocabulary, categorizing things kids would rather not talk about, gives everybody a key to knowing when it's time to stop being polite and start getting serious.

Tell Somebody

In keeping with my promise to my kids that I will never try to be the "cool dad," I make them talk to me (or, more frequently, I make them tolerate listening to me) when I weigh in on subjects such as friends, relationships and sexuality. I encourage them to ask me if they have questions, if they're confused, if they're scared. But I take it a step further … I beg them to tell somebody if they need help. I point them to their cool, older cousins whom they idolize, because it horrifies me to imagine them keeping something serious bottled up merely because they were too uncomfortable asking me or, worse, worried that by going to someone else they'd hurt my feelings. Providing safe, trusted alternate routes in many of life's endeavors is what we parents have done since the day they were born.

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