

Revealing Family Secrets

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Abstract

“Children should be seen and not heard.” How many times did I hear this when I was little? After a while I didn’t need it whispered into my ear anymore, I embodied it. I knew there were things I was never expected to say, at home or out in public, like they never happened. Off [...]

Article

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How many times did I hear this when I was little? After a while I didn’t need it whispered into my ear anymore, I embodied it. I knew there were things I was never expected to say, at home or out in public, like they never happened. Off limits for good, like a dangerous abandoned mine.

It made for an interesting supper time as my family sat around chatting. Never characterized as quiet people by any stretch of the imagination, my parent’s hushed tone signaled an off-subject topic that immediately sank into the family vault. Adoptions, affairs, sickness, rage, runaways, sexuality, abuse, alcoholics, you name it. They called them Family Secrets.

Now as a parent with a lot to explain I finally understand what they were trying to accomplish, walk a very fine line between what’s public and what’s private behind and outside closed doors. What do you share with others? What things do you keep to yourself?

Last week Hope came home in a panic. Not thinking of the consequences (and probably just wanting to make conversation) her brother commented to some friends that Hope named herself. Since she’s stealth at school this information is strictly confidential, and Will knows it. Although she profusely denied the claim to her friends, she retained a look of betrayal several hours later as we sat at the dinner table to discuss.

Looking more like a hungover frat boy than a well-intentioned 5-year-old, Will sat with his head in his hands as he kept saying, “I don’t know why I said it.” I believed him, and yet the question of boundaries was sitting before us like the holiday meal scheduled less than 48 hours away.

“What if Hope talked to your friends about the fact that you sleep with your Lovey at night?” he popped upright looking remarkably alert, and shocked, “Would that make you feel good? Would that be something you’d like your family to share with your classmates?” His answer was clear. And so we talked about what privacy means and why it’s important to us. No threats of retribution. No code of silence like when I was young. Just logic infused with love.

That night I lay in bed thinking of how parenting feels like one long essay question. Every so often there's a pop quiz that tests your skills. What have you mastered? What needs improvement? It challenges me to use my voice as an individual and a parent instead of mindlessly falling back on the way I was raised.

My children are encouraged to speak their mind and stand in their truth. Most of the time it works out for the best, and other days it becomes crystal clear that we are still learning our boundaries and finding our way. I'm grateful for this. Hope learned how to handle feeling outed. Will learned that his words have consequences, and can hurt people. I learned that I am not so afraid of secrets.

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