



## Confidentiality

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In the early years of developing programs for social and emotional learning, my colleagues and I assumed that absolute confidentiality was an essential ingredient of a class of this nature. When students did break confidentiality, the ensuing uproar and sense of betrayal could lead to long-term damage to the group. In one case where students perceived that a teacher had broken confidentiality, many students in that grade felt disillusioned with the whole program. Their feelings carried over into the beginning of the next year. With years of experience, I have gained a new perspective about the limits to confidentiality. These limits must be understood by the teacher and communicated early to the students in order to avoid feelings of betrayal in the speaker or an undue burden on a troubled listener.

In the first or second class, we have a brainstorming session with the students in which we list all the groundrules needed to promote safety and trust. Confidentiality is always mentioned. While I will write this word on the board when a student suggests it, I always flag this one as something we will need to come back to and discuss in greater depth.

### **Limits To Confidentiality For The Teacher**

As teachers, we have always communicated the limits to our own confidentiality. Suicide threats or ideation, child abuse, drug/alcohol use on campus require immediate reporting of situation to an administrator followed by an appropriate referral. These are mandated by state law or school policy. In addition, we tell them that if we feel concerned for their health or well-being, we may feel compelled by our own personal caring to share our concerns with a dean. In both cases, we assure students that if at all possible, we would speak to them first and include them in the process of choosing the appropriate administrator and include them in the visit. However, if we cannot reach the student and there is immediate cause for concern, we must break confidentiality and make our report.

The procedure and policies regarding limits to teacher confidentiality have not changed. But what has changed over the years of experience is our approach to student confidentiality.

## Limits To Confidentiality For The Student

We realized that for adolescents it is not always appropriate to expect. It is often difficult at this age to contain emotionally loaded information. I begin the process with my students by asking them why they think people tell other people's private thoughts and feelings. We then engage in a dialogue, which helps them become conscious, and therefore less likely to indulge in some of the negative reasons for violating confidentiality. We also explore the legitimate reasons why people feel compelled to tell another's story.

One of the first things students mention is gossip. I ask them why they think people gossip. They acknowledge the power and popularity it can bring. I suggest that we could agree here not to use other people's stories in this way and they nod their heads. What else? They talk about thoughtlessly blurting out something private because it is interesting or exciting to them. This too, an impulsive and unconscious violation of the privacy of others, we agree is something we will do our best to control.

Then we move into some of the more legitimate concerns that can lead any of us to tell the story of another. We may break confidentiality out of a genuine need to take care of ourselves - someone else's private disclosure may stir a deep emotional response or concern in the listener which cannot and should not be kept to oneself. At such times, there is a conflict between the need to take care of the other (maintain confidentiality to protect their privacy) the need to take care of oneself (to share and get support or clarification for feelings that arise in response to another's sharing). This is an important part of being human and searching for integrity. We need to explain this to our students and brainstorm ways to resolve this conflict in ways that minimize hurt to both sides.

For the speaker: Since confidentiality can't be guaranteed, take care of yourself and only share what you are comfortable sharing. Once you put it out, you can't predict what will happen to it. So be conscious of that when you speak; be discriminating about what you share and when, knowing that it may get out beyond the group.

For the listener: If you feel the need to share something that was spoken by someone in class, ask yourself why you are doing so and how you can do it in a way that takes care of your need while not hurting your classmate. Be sure you don't just blurt it out without thinking or because it seems thrilling to you. If, on the other hand, it is really upsetting to you and you need to talk to someone about it, whom can you talk to?

We brainstorm together on this dilemma. Students suggest people they could talk to who would be least likely to violate the privacy of their classmate. Suggestions include: talk to the person who actually spoke about it, talk to your teacher, bring it up in the next class if you can wait a week, talk to your parents, talk to a friend or relative who lives outside this community. As suggestions are made, we often ask students how they would feel about something they said being repeated to a person in the category suggested. I find that students continue to insist that they can be absolutely confidential

and that they want others to "swear to secrecy," but this discussion helps them to appreciate in a realistic and compassionate way that someone may need to break confidentiality. It helps them be more aware about what they share and hopefully, to be better able to forgive if there is a breach of confidentiality.

### **Parents' concerns about confidentiality**

Some individual parents, as well as organized parent groups today, are deeply suspicious of programs that encourage students to tell personal stories or share feelings. One such program was attacked precisely because confidentiality was encouraged. As teachers and trainers, we must be sensitive to, and accountable to parents needs and beliefs in this arena. It is always important to dialogue early with parents when programs that deal with emotions are initiated. We can convey that we are not encouraging their children to tell their own or family secrets or probe into private matters. When we encourage students to honor the privacy of others, we are teaching children to respect boundaries - their own and those of others. Boundaries are weak and unclear for many adolescents, especially during the middle school years, and strengthening boundaries is an essential part of developing a healthy identity. Giving parents a chance to express their concerns, questions and suggestions about the content and strategies of our work is an important part of the collaborative process of designing a social and emotional learning program that has integrity and consistency throughout the lives of the students who receive it.