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ESSAY

Don't Overdiscuss Your Teen's Problems

Well-meaning parents can sometimes dwell too long on a child's difficulties with friends and school, doing more harm than good



ILLUSTRATION: JULIETTE BORDA

By Jennifer Breheny Wallace

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When the mean girls (or boys) strike at school, many parents naturally want to ask about every last detail—and then they continue to check in to see how the situation is going. A growing body of research suggests, however, that dwelling on such problems can do a child more harm than good.

Talking through a child's troubles is healthy in moderation. But when children routinely engage in what psychologists call "co-rumination"—excessively rehashing and speculating about problems with a parent or a friend—it can amplify stress, impair judgment and increase the risk of developing anxiety and depression.

Co-rumination involves continuously repeating details or feelings about a situation, or discussing it again even when no new information is being introduced, says Amanda Rose, a psychology professor at the University of Missouri, who developed the concept in a 2002 journal article. "Parents who co-ruminate with their children are on the right path in building warmth and closeness in their relationships," she says. "They just need to learn to stop some conversations sooner."

Teenage girls, in particular, are prone to co-ruminate: Why didn't she invite me to her party? Is he about to break up with me? Adolescents often pick up this unhealthy pattern from well-meaning parents.

In a 2013 study published in the *Journal of Adolescence*, Dr. Rose and her colleague Erika Waller surveyed 400 students in fifth, eighth and 11th grades and found that adolescents who co-ruminated with their mothers were more likely to exhibit symptoms of anxiety and depression and more likely to co-ruminate with their own friends.

'Interviewing for pain does your child a disservice.'

Parents sometimes keep a negative situation alive by continually bringing up a painful topic long after their child has worked it through, says Arlington, Mass.-based

psychologist Michael Thompson, co-author of "Best Friends, Worst Enemies." If your child has a fight with a peer, he says, resist the urge to ask lots of probing questions day after day, like "Did he tease you again?"

"Interviewing for pain does your child a disservice" by focusing on the negative, says Dr. Thompson. Instead, he suggests, listen and respond with empathy, saying such things as, "I'm so sorry you have to deal with that mean behavior." Then "refocus the conversation from being a victim to how they'll empower themselves, such as 'So, how do you think you're going to handle this?'"

Fixating on the dark side can make problems seem bigger and more serious than they are. That may lead adolescents to behave in ways that can make a difficult situation even worse, according to a study published last year in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. Researchers surveyed 628 seventh and 10th graders and asked about depressive symptoms (such as sadness or feeling blue), experiences of stress (with peers or in romantic relationships) and co-rumination with a best friend (how frequently they rehashed problems or dwelled on negative feelings.)

"Nine months later, we assessed these adolescents again and found that those who co-ruminated with a best friend and felt even just a little sad reported having even more problems with peers months later," says lead author Dr. Rose. Instead of letting a problem go, co-rumination may cause adolescents to act in counterproductive ways, such as continuing to ask a friend about being left out of an activity, which then generates even more stress.

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Dr. Rose says that one of the most effective ways for parents to break the habit is to be aware that you're doing it. When conversations turn circular, suggest a

walk or something else to distract. Share the research on co-rumination with your teen, she says, and be explicit about why you're changing the subject: "It's not that I don't care. It's that I want you to feel good, not stuck thinking about the negative." Encourage your teen to do the same with friends.

"We live in a society that associates 'more' with 'better,'" adds Dr. Rose. "When it comes to parenting, 'more' isn't always better. In fact, it can often backfire."

—Ms. Wallace is a freelance writer in New York.

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