



Gossip-free Zones

Problem Solving to Prevent Power Struggles

Holly Elissa Bruno

When we have concerns about the professional behavior of a co-worker, we shall first let that person know of our concern in a way that shows respect for personal dignity and for the diversity to be found among staff members, and then attempt to resolve the matter collegially and in a confidential manner.

—NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct (P-3A.2)

Janice, who dislikes the program director, Elena, whispers to her co-teacher that Elena is getting rich at the program's expense by taking long lunches, going on a Caribbean cruise, and paying staff low salaries. Janice complains that Elena is an incompetent fiscal manager; Janice "knows" the payroll has been almost late every week. Girls in Janice's classroom imitate her animated whispering. Today Janice tells Orlando's mother that she is scared her paycheck will be late. Janice expects her coteacher to side with her against Elena. Whenever Elena visits the classroom, Janice smiles sweetly and treats Elena as if she were her best friend. What can the co-teacher do?

IMAGINE A WORKPLACE WHERE

- The well-being of children and families is the focus of everyone's attention.
- Every employee looks forward to work.
- Staff members discuss conflicts respectfully and negotiate solutions.

Children learn by observing us. Adults who gossip about and exclude others model destructive behavior for children. Gossip can also harm parents like Orlando's mother; their trust in the professionalism of the program is compromised.

What is gossip?

Gossip is discussion of a personal or intimate nature, often about someone who is not present and with the intent of harming that person's reputation. Listening to gossip is gossiping. Sharing accurate, necessary information or holding an opinion about another person is not gossiping.

Some people use gossip to gain and maintain power, at the expense of community. By sabotaging Elena's leadership, Janice diminishes the director's effectiveness, putting Janice in charge in many ways.

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A *coup d'état* takes place beneath the radar screen. Program quality and morale plummet.

An invitation

This article is an invitation to choose professionalism over gossip and negativity. Leaving behind covert dynamics (gossip) makes room for aboveboard, mutual problem solving as envisioned in NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct (2005). Early childhood educators can share an abundance of uplifting, collegial, productive dynamics; gossip undermines these capacities. We have the power to create, implement, and enforce policies and procedures to shoo gossip and negativity out the door.

Why do some people gossip?

Research shows that men may be neurologically wired to deal with conflict differently than women (Cahill et al. 2004). Confrontations between men are typically direct, aggressive, and aimed at determining who has the greater status. Anthropologist Marjorie Harness Goodwin notes that once young men have completed conflict, they quickly move on (Goodwin 1990). Women, on the other hand, tend to avoid direct confrontation, instead choosing to seek support from other women (Tannen 1991). Gossip is avoidant behavior. Janice expresses her resentment toward Elena indirectly, without confronting her face-to-face. She gossips, perhaps because she does not know how to express her views in person.

According to Bruno and Copeland (1999), 80 percent of early childhood leaders are conflict avoidant; we fear direct confrontation. Many of us prefer to believe that problems eventually go away. Center directors and other supervisors hope staff will magically get the message to improve performance by observing how supervisors do things. Jamilah R. Jor'dan, founder and president of the Partnership for Quality Child Care in Chicago, observes, "One aspect of the avoidance behavior is that we see, but we do not see. We put off what needs to be done. By the time we decide to address a problem, it has reached the point of confrontation. Gossip creates a work environment that is mean-spirited and impacts morale" (pers. comm.).

Groups of people who have been forbidden direct access to power often compensate by using indirect means such as gossip.

Groups of people who have been forbidden direct access to power by law or by custom often compensate by using indirect means such as gossip. Researchers Woolsey and McBain note, "Women who feel powerless tend to disguise their rising hostility. They do not attack openly. They do not acknowledge their own backbiting and gossiping or the harmful consequences of their prolonged avoidance of conflict" (1987). Gossipers lack the skill, confidence, and perhaps motivation to confront another person. Gossip is a habit that can become almost an addiction we feel we have to lie about or deny. Reversing habits and addictions effectively requires a sustained, systemic, community effort.

Gossip in early childhood programs

Do our early childhood colleagues identify gossip as a concern? To find out, I queried more than 700 early childhood professionals across the country. Respondents were women and men representing urban and rural programs and coming from culturally diverse backgrounds. I queried these professionals at the onset of meetings or workshops I held with each group. Most of the workshops were offered at professional conferences for groups such as NAEYC, NBCDI (National Black Child Development Institute), and state and regional Head Start associations. I asked participants to complete the following sentence in any way that reflected their experience: "When women work with women _____." (You might wish to take a moment to fill in the blank.)



In my unscientific poll, more than half the respondents named gossip, backbiting, catfights, or power struggles as women's work dynamics. Three times more respondents named destructive dynamics than named constructive dynamics such as friendship, caring, humor, or empathy. Only 12 percent listed both destructive and constructive dynamics. Of those I asked, more than two-thirds had experienced gossip at work and expected it to continue.

This constitutes a daunting challenge. If many of us are conflict avoidant and work in environments plagued by gossip, how can we transform our cultures? What would prompt Janice to face her issues with Elena directly?

Creating gossip-free zones

[Employers should strive] to create and maintain a climate of trust and candor that will enable staff to speak and act in the best interests of children, families, and the field of early childhood care and education.

— NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct (I-3C.2)

Taking a stand for a gossip-free new day requires courage. Leaders must first make an internal commitment to model, promote, and enforce policies and practices that replace gossip with effective problem solving. Most of us will need to line up members of our support system to encourage us when resistance to change becomes most intense. Some of us may need to let go of our secure position as insiders who do not rock the boat. Here is one way administrators can initiate the change process.

- Call everyone together. Announce your vision of a gossip-free community of problem-solving professionals.
- Let staff know that NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct will be honored and enforced.
- Encourage people to talk about their concerns, hopes, and fears about committing to a gossip-free zone.
- Have staff work in small groups to envision how to become a gossip-free team by creating anti-gossip strategies.

This approach can help staff focus on the goal of serving children and families by replacing gossip with respectful communication.

Strategies for supervisors

Here are practical, everyday approaches to keeping up the momentum.

Update employee job descriptions. Add and enforce this statement as a functional requirement of the job: "Maintaining a gossip-free work environment."

Be clear about your stand against gossip. Picture a director who posts this sign in her office: "Is this good for children and families?" That director can place every instance of gossip in its proper perspective. "Janice, when you spoke to Orlando's mom about the payroll, how was that helpful to Orlando and his mom?"

Display your organization's mission statement prominently. Early childhood mission and philosophy statements hold respect for others and ourselves as essential. Demonstrate respect through effective communication and problem solving, placing organizational goals over self-aggrandizement.

Problem solve using NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct at staff meetings.

Devote staff development sessions to building the skills needed to create gossip-free zones. Ask staff to practice applying the code to the case studies provided at the end of this article.

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Demonstrate respect through effective communication, placing organizational goals over self-aggrandizement.

Provide staff with empowering statements and practices to stop gossip. “I need to focus on the children right now” or “I am not comfortable talking about someone who is not here” can stop gossip instantly. A more complete list of gossip stoppers follows, as do model peer problem-solving practices.

Develop an agreement for a gossip-free program. Offer staff development sessions in effective problem solving. Then ask employees to read, discuss, and sign an agreement such as the following. Include this agreement in the staff handbook and signed agreements in employee files (see “Agreement to Resolve Problems”).

Update your staff handbook. Add this statement to your policies: “Our program has zero tolerance for gossip” or “This program is a gossip-free work environment. We are committed to respectful, problem-solving communication.”



Enforcing standards of behavior: The five-step process

To ensure gossip-free workplaces, supervisors must uphold written standards by enforcing consequences for gossiping. Directors fear that even though staff agree not to gossip, some will go right back to it “as soon as I leave the room.” When ethical standards are not enforced, gossip spreads like the flu.

Trish, a director in Massachusetts, is “sick and tired of being sick and tired” of the debilitating effects of gossip on her program. Trish and her assistant director call a staff meeting dedicated to creating a gossip-free work environment. Staff members are asked to sign an agreement to resolve the problems. The next day, when gossip resumes, Trish calls each gossipier into her office to confront her. Trish reminds each one that her behavior is being documented; the next steps are probation and termination.

Agreement to Resolve Problems

I, _____,
an employee of _____,

agree to promptly and directly raise any issue I have with another staff member. I agree to work with my colleague to find a mutually agreeable solution that builds on both of our strengths. If, after a good-faith effort, the conflict remains unresolved, I will request a meeting with my director (or designee) and my colleague to resolve the conflict. I agree to take to that meeting at least two possible solutions that will honor the needs of the organization and both people. I agree to neither gossip about, nor hold back from, resolving an issue that affects the quality of care and education our organization offers. I will participate fully in staff development sessions on problem-solving techniques.

(Signature)

(Date)

Trish confronts gossip by using the following five-step process for holding staff accountable (Bruno & Copeland 1999):

1. Name the inappropriate behavior. Be concrete and specific. “Janice, telling Orlando’s mom you think your paycheck will be late is not appropriate.”
2. State what is expected. “You agreed to problem solve, not to gossip.”
3. Require the staff member to take responsibility for resolving the problem. Ask, “What will you do to resolve issues rather than to gossip about them?”
4. Agree on a workable plan. “Elena, I will take that workshop you recommended on having difficult conversations.”
5. Set a date for follow-up and evaluation. “Janice, we’ll meet in my office one week from today to assess your progress on stopping gossip. Meanwhile, we will check in daily. If you gossip again, the consequence is probation.”

Trish was successful in holding her staff accountable in part because the five steps support her program’s philos-

ophy of modeling problem-solving behavior for children. Employees unwilling to meet professional standards were shown the door. Within a month, one staff member resigned and another was fired. The center became gossip free. Staff morale rose, uplifting children and families and resulting in more effective care and education.

The power of peers to stop gossip

What power do individual staff members have to stop gossip? Employees feel more confident doing their part when they observe supervisors enforcing the gossip-free zone. By listening to gossip, we enable the gossiper.

Here are some gossip stoppers anyone can use:

- I am not comfortable talking about a person who is not here.
- I need to focus on the children now.
- Would you be willing to talk with X about your concern with her?
- I'll go with you so you can share your concern with X.
- I promised not to gossip.
- Let's not go there.
- Since I can't help you with that problem, please don't raise it with me again.
- Remember, we signed an agreement not to gossip.
- Our mission statement says we respect differences.

Each of these statements is respectful and consistent with the Code of Ethical Conduct (NAEYC 2005).

For my early childhood administration course at a community college, student and preschool lead teacher Danielle Donati Gulden wrote,

I found the hardest part of working with women was gossip. I used to crave it like a drug, but have since recovered. I let my coteachers know that I had my fill of gossip and to leave me out of the mix. Whenever I would hear gossip, I would say to myself, "Walk away, walk away." Eventually they just stopped including me in the gossip. It never felt so good to be left out.

Discussing case studies at staff meetings can help staff increase their confidence in combating gossip. See "Case Studies" for the basic process and a few examples. Directors and staff members can create additional case studies for continued practice at follow-up staff meetings.

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Case Studies

How would you address the following situations? In small groups, read each case study aloud, then share times when you faced similar situations. Together address the reflection questions that follow each case. Refer to strategies in the article to help create a gossip-free workplace.

LaVonda

LaVonda was hired to replace Betty, who was dismissed after stealing from the petty cash. Teachers resent that Betty was fired. No one wants to work with LaVonda. They avoid her, make up stories, and leave her out of conversations. This afternoon, Yvette and Trixie invite you to go shopping after work. LaVonda is standing beside you. They look right through her.

- What can you do or say in the moment?
- How do you feel about confronting Yvette and Trixie directly?
- What steps can you take to help other staff welcome and include LaVonda?

Melinda

Babysitting for center families is against center policies, but Melinda believes it's okay to attend children's birthday parties in their homes. Every time Melinda returns from a child's home, she excitedly confides all the "dirt" she got at the party. "Harry's dad takes trips with his secretary. His mommy is livid," she whispers. On another day, "Angela's mom has a new boyfriend. On my way to the bathroom, I looked in her bedroom and saw photos on the nightstand."

- How do you feel about Melinda's behavior?
- What effects might her behavior have on the children?
 - Can you find a statement in NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct that applies?
 - What can you say to Melinda?
- If Melinda continues to gossip, what are your options?

Tallulah

Toddler lead teacher Tallulah has outlasted every director you can remember. Tallulah has taken on the role of unofficially "mentoring" each new employee. She advises a new hire to avoid Cheri because of mood swings, Thomas because he doesn't like women, and Imelda, who prefers people who speak Spanish. When you suggest that the program is being harmed by Tallulah's words, other staff shrug it off. "There's nothing we can do," they groan.

- What concerns you about Tallulah's behavior?
 - What section of NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct applies?
- What steps can you take to address this situation?

Peer conflict resolution process

We shall provide staff members with safe and supportive working conditions that . . . permit them to carry out their responsibilities through fair performance evaluation, written grievance procedures, constructive feedback, and opportunities for continuing professional development and advancement.

—NAEYC’s Code of Ethical Conduct (P-3C.2)

The five-step process for holding staff accountable described earlier supports supervisors in their efforts to end gossip. Here is a problem-solving practice that empowers staff peers to work directly through their problems. Transitioning from conflict avoidance to directness takes time and support. Consider identifying, training, and using peer coaches to keep problem solving on track.

Remind staff that one of the ways children learn how to resolve conflicts is by watching teachers work through their disagreements. The key question to ask is, “How can you resolve this issue in a way that models problem solving for the children?” Adults ask children to use their words. However, unless we use *our* words effectively, we cannot demonstrate mature, cooperative behavior for children. Post these steps for problem solving in the staff room and the director’s office:

- What are the facts? Focus on your own observations: no blaming, shaming, or inflaming the other person.
- What’s the underlying problem?
- How can you resolve this issue together in a way that models problem solving for the children?
- Brainstorm solutions that work for both people.
- Agree on a solution that ensures ongoing, direct communication.
- Stop discussion temporarily if either person feels attacked personally. Resume problem solving with the agreement that you will find a solution for the sake of the children.

Transitioning from indirect to direct communication can be difficult. Some team members will be quicker than others to master problem-solving skills. Honor successful problem solvers by asking them to function as peer coaches who can help other staff work through conflict.

In addition to enforcing the ground rules above, peer coaches can draw from this five-step coaching process:

1. What is your vision of how you could work together effectively?
2. What are the barriers to working together?

3. Name three steps you can take to improve the situation.
4. Take one step at a time.
5. Meet again to discuss “What is our vision now?”

Janice’s coteacher might say:

“My vision is to work together without gossiping.”

“One barrier is that I have been afraid to talk with you directly about our differences.”

“One step we can take is to keep our focus on what the children need.”

The peer coach would ask Janice about her vision, what barriers she sees, and what steps she can take. This collaborative process invites co-workers to share responsibility for resolving their problems. Janice, like all of us, has a choice: to grow or to gossip.

Does venting help or hurt?

Can we expect employees to problem solve effectively when they still have strong feelings about their conflicts? Daniel Goleman (1997) warns of the temporary power of the brain’s amygdala to “hijack” our professional perspective. When we feel threatened, the amygdalae (four small almond-shaped groups of neurons in the center of our brain) trigger adrenalin or cortisol to speed through our system.

Some people need to vent or express their upset feelings before they can calm down to problem solve with another person. The danger is that although venting can relieve tension for one party, it does not solve the conflict. To be a productive component in problem solving, venting needs to be

1. limited in time (for example, no more than 10 minutes);
2. in private, in the presence of a supervisor;
3. followed up within a day by a meeting to resolve the problem.

Venting *per se* not only does not solve the problem, but can also be gossiping. However, when venting adheres to the three steps above, it can help those who tend to be more susceptible to amygdala hijacks.

Conclusion

Imagine a workplace where staff members respectfully discuss and resolve differences. In such an environment gossipers will have no audience. Trust and candor free

Honor successful problem solvers by asking them to function as peer coaches who can help other staff work through conflict.

us to focus on the happiness and well-being of children and families.

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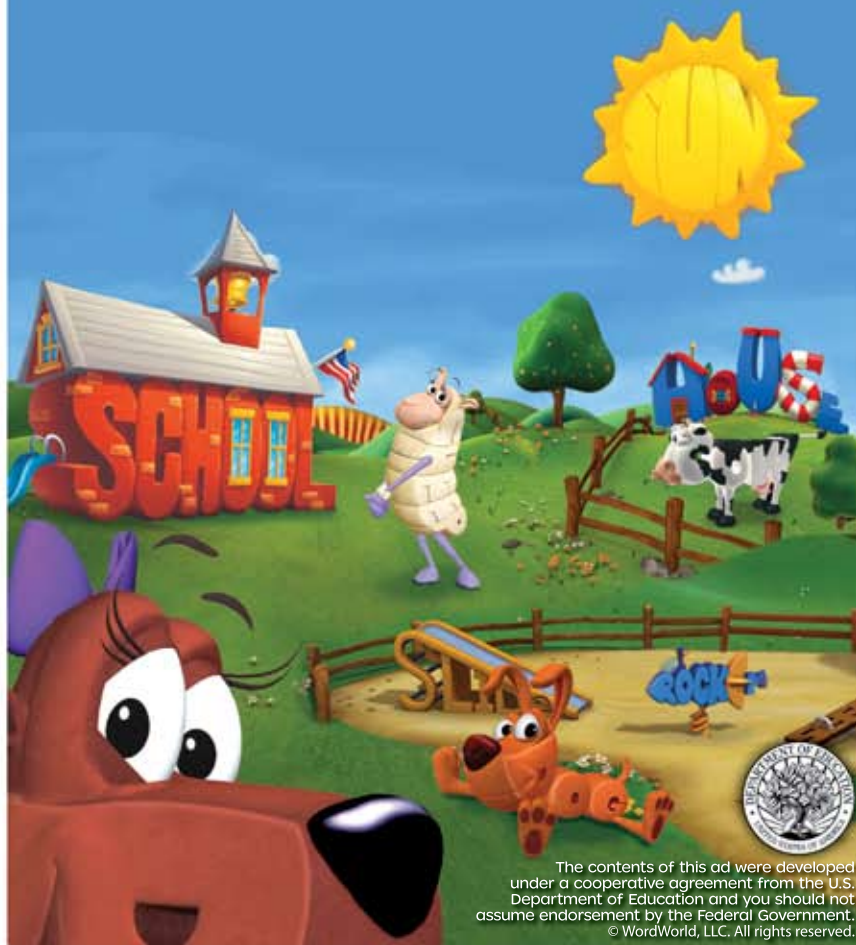
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