



Surprises vs. Secrets

(Adapted from Saving Grace)

Surprises make a child feel warm, excited, and happy. *A child is encouraged to share a surprise when the time is right.* Examples include birthday presents, something made at school, a special outing.

Secrets may make a child feel sad, unhappy, and scared. *The child is told not to tell* and sometimes is bribed, threatened, blackmailed, or coerced into not telling. For example, an older child tells a younger child to pull down his or her underwear, and then says he will beat the other up if he or she tells.

Some Ideas to Help

- Teach children the difference between surprises and secrets.
- Give them concrete examples (like those mentioned above) and tell them they can inform others that they are “not allowed to keep secrets.”
- Give children vocabulary for body parts and functions. Let them know that they can ask you questions about body parts and that nothing about bodies needs to be a secret.
- Be honest. Straight information helps a child stay safe, while vague warnings may only make them afraid. Ask “did I answer your question?” or “do you understand?”
- Encourage children to tell someone they trust when a secret or surprise makes them uncomfortable. Praise them whenever they do so.

Telling vs. Tattling

It’s extremely important for children to know the difference between **telling** an adult that they have a problem that they can’t handle, and **tattling** on someone else in order to get that person in trouble.

Telling - Children need to feel confident that they can count on adults for support and help in solving their problems, and that’s what telling is all about. Children should be encouraged to tell adults whenever they feel they are in over their heads.

Tattling - Used to get attention or to bring negative attention to someone else, children tattle, not as a way to ask for assistance or support, but as a way to get back at someone else or to avoid getting in trouble themselves.

Some Ideas to Help

- Use an example: Mary and John are playing, and Mary hits John. John runs and tells you. Does John really need your help? Did he tease Mary until she hit him, so he could complain?
- When you are unsure of whether a child is telling or tattling, get more information and then decide if you need to get involved. Ask how he or she thinks you can help. Sometimes they do have ideas, and saying them out loud gives them confidence in solving the problem. Use these situations to teach the children about telling and tattling.
- When in doubt, believe the child. Young people need to know that they can rely on adults when they are in trouble.