

## Gossiping and Spreading Rumors

Begin this lesson by reading this Folktale to the class.

### **A Folktale**

A young man spread a false rumor about an old man who lived at the end of his street. Overcome with guilt, he worked up the courage to apologize. He humbly walked to the old man's door and said he was sorry. The wise old man looked at him. He said that he would forgive him, but first he must take a feather pillow to the top of a hill and pop it so that all the feathers spread in the wind. The young man thought it a strange request, but he did as the old man asked. Afterward, he went to report this to the old man and asked for forgiveness again. The old man said that when the young man collected all of the feathers, then he would be forgiven.

**Our words, like feathers, get scattered everywhere. The next time you are tempted to pass gossip along, remember that once your words are spoken, they can never be taken back.**

Lead a discussion about rumors with the students.

First, define a rumor. Ask students how they would define rumors/gossip. Their definition should be a statement that people make about another person, place, or thing that is usually not founded in facts and often untrue.

Remind students that one clue that something is a rumor is if it seems

unbelievable. Next, have students think of examples of rumors.

**Not all types of rumors and gossip are alike, and some can be more hurtful and damaging than others. Below is a list of the different types. Ask students to help describe what the differences are in rumors/gossip.**

## **1. Slander**

- Slander is when people spread rumors or lies about a person in order to *purposely* cause pain or damage. Maybe they want to see this person humiliated or turn others against him or her. They make up lies or pass on embarrassing rumors that probably aren't true.
- Most of the time, we only hear the word "slander" associated with adult conflicts, but it applies to young people as well.
- When slander is in written form, it's called libel. You've probably heard lots of stories about celebs suing tabloid newspapers because the papers have published libel against them. The celebs usually win!
- Slander is one of the most dangerous types of rumors, because the whole point is to hurt somebody.
- An example: "Teresa is a big cheat. She cheats off anyone she sits next to, so don't ever sit near her." This is hurtful to Teresa because not only is she being accused of doing something against the rules, her friends may stop sitting with her in class.

## **2. Dishing**

- You may hear people say, "Give me the dish!" or "Let's dish the dirt!" Dishing is another word for gossiping, and a kind of general spreading of rumors and gossip that people don't usually think twice about.
- It's a little different than slander, because most of the time, people don't dish with the aim of causing someone pain and humiliation. However, sometimes it does just that.
- An example: "I asked Jenny what it was like to hold Andrew's hand, and she said it was all clammy and sweaty." This was probably an innocent question and answer driven by curiosity, but if it gets back to Andrew, he'll feel totally embarrassed!

### **3. Fears or Concerns**

- Many rumors tap into people's common fears, and this makes them sound true even though they usually are not.
- These are often rumors that involve the threat of physical danger, the unknown and unfamiliar, and things that are gross or way-out weird.
- An example: "I hear that the cafeteria meatloaf is made from rats they catch in the school basement."

### **4. Jokes or Wild Stories**

- Sometimes rumors start out as silly jokes, then get spread around and changed over and over again. When lots of people are telling the same tale, it makes it seem more like the truth. You might think, "How can *all* these people be wrong?"
- When these rumors last long enough and spread far enough, they actually become part of our culture, often called "Urban Legends," "Modern Legends," or "Urban Myths."
- An example: "Did you hear that when it's halftime at the Super Bowl, water supplies across the U.S. get used up? It's because of all the people going to the bathroom at the same time!"

### **5. Misinformation**

- Many rumors are just about people getting things wrong, or believing in exaggerations. Often people will swear up and down that they know something to be true when, in reality, they're just passing on a rumor they've heard from someone.
- An example of a rumor that's just misinformation: "I heard that it's okay to drive five miles an hour above the speed limit. The police can't give you a ticket unless you go faster than that." For the record, this is not true. The speed limit is the speed limit, but this rumor is so widespread that people often use it as an excuse with police officers who are writing them speeding tickets!

## **6. Cyber-Gossip**

- If you've ever heard something juicy on Facebook, in texts, or on Instagram, you know that the Internet has made it easy to spread a rumor to lots of people with lightning-fast speed. "Cyber-gossip" can involve any of the other types mentioned here.
- It's easy for people to feel less responsible when starting a rumor online, especially if they're able to do it anonymously. Remember that starting a rumor this way, or passing it on, can be even more damaging than if it's done in person because of how many eyes it can reach in a short period of time.

A hurtful rumor that's spread through cyber-gossip should be taken just as seriously as any other kind of rumor.

**Discuss with students why rumors are usually negative and have negative effects.**

### **Guiding questions:**

- 1. If you heard a bad rumor about someone, how would it make you treat that person?**
- 2. If you heard a bad rumor about a place, would you go there?**
- 3. How can rumors hurt people?**
- 4. What happens when rumors spread?**
- 5. Why do people gossip or spread rumors?**

**Some suggestions: to feel superior, to feel like part of the group, for attention, for control or power, out of jealousy or need for revenge, out of boredom**

### **6. What do you think these proverbs mean?**

What you don't see with your eyes, don't witness with your mouth. ~Jewish Proverb

Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you. ~Spanish Proverb

Who brings a tale takes two away. ~Irish Proverb

**Stress the fact that the choice to gossip lies within oneself.**

**After the discussion, brainstorm ways to deal with and stop rumors. Develop a class plan or set of protocols for discouraging rumors if they arise.**

Optional tips to help while brainstorming solutions:

[From wordscanheal.org](http://wordscanheal.org)

## **The Top Ten Tips for Healing with Words**

- Bite your tongue before you gossip; your tongue will hurt, but your friends won't.
- Stop yourself from gossiping by changing the subject mid-sentence; only you will notice.
- Never say derogatory things about yourself; people might agree with you.
- Never use humor to put others down; joking around usually comes around.
- Speak sweetly, so if you have to eat your words, they won't taste so bad.
- The gossip game always takes turns; the only way to avoid being "it" is to stop playing.
- Trust makes a friendship; gossip takes it away.
- You are the proud owner of a set of ears; use them at

your own discretion.

- To get friends who won't gossip about you, you must be a friend who won't gossip about them.
- Stamp out gossip by voting with your feet; just walk away if someone gossips.