

Gossip causes long-term damage, especially for children who hear it

Dear Abby: When I was growing up, my mother and the other ladies in our church were extremely polite to each other. However, when one of them wasn't present, the others would talk behind her back. They would compliment a woman to her face, then criticize her as soon as she walked away.

Mother always defended this behavior as a "harmless" pastime. I don't know whether it hurt the people who were the butt of gossip, but I know it harmed me and the children who were listening.

Their behavior taught me not to trust anyone — especially people who were nice to my face. Instead, I trusted abusive people because I thought they were being honest. I ended up running with a bad crowd and found myself dating abusive men because I couldn't trust polite guys.

When someone complimented me, I didn't believe it, so I never developed self-confidence. I was afraid people were laughing at me behind my back. I had trouble making friends with other girls because I was afraid to open up and reveal my feelings for fear that whatever I



Dear Abby

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said would become grist for the gossip mill.

After a year of therapy, I finally have found the self-confidence I lacked. My sisters haven't been so lucky. Both are married to abusive men.

Abby, please inform your readers that there is nothing harmless about gossip, especially to children who may overhear it. — **Gaining Trust in Georgia**

Dear Gaining Trust: Your experience and that of your sisters has stated that fact more strongly than I could have. It brings to mind a piece that has appeared in my column before. Read on:

NOBODY'S FRIEND

(Author Unknown)

My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice.

I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives.

I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age.

The more I am quoted, the more I am believed.

My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name or face.

To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become.

I am nobody's friend.

Once I tarnish a reputation, it never is the same.

I topple governments and wreck marriages.

I ruin careers and cause sleepless nights, heartaches and indigestion.

I make innocent people cry in their pillows.

Even my name hisses. I am called Gossip. I make headlines and headaches.

Readers, before you repeat a story, ask yourself: Is it true? Is it harmless? Is it necessary?

If it isn't, don't repeat it. ■

Send questions to Dear Abby, P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles 90069. For a personal reply, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren and her daughter, Jeanne Phillips.