

Teachable Moments

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Those of us who teach, and I include grandparents, aunts, uncles, coaches, scout leaders, RE teachers as well as parents, tell our children about “good” and “bad” touch. We tell them to be careful about what they post on social networking sites, and to never go with a stranger. We teach preteens red flags when they are on the Internet, and we instruct dating teens about date rape and all the ways they can protect themselves against bullying relationships. We teach children and teens a whole host of behaviors, signs, and signals so they will be safe from sexual predators. We also teach them about appropriate boundaries. An effective way to teach any lesson is by using examples, but even better than that is using “teachable moments.” There are times when we can point out a specific behavior immediately after it has been observed or experienced that illustrates a lesson we have taught. This brief article is about a “teachable moment” regarding proper boundaries.



I was visiting with a friend I had not seen in a long time. He was reminiscing about the good time his family had this past summer visiting his beach house. He said his nephew, 15, and his niece, 11, used to be difficult because they constantly fought and yelled at each other, but this summer was different. This year while the young cousins constantly hung out together, “They got along well.” He further described the two cousins as “wrestling with each other all weekend.” They wrestled on the family room floor, on the couch, and outside on the sandy beach. He said it was so good to hear the laughter and the giggles. All of a sudden he looked at me and said, “Now don’t tell me you think there is something wrong with this. These are good kids.” After realizing my well-practiced “poker” face had failed me, I assured him I believed they were good kids and I was not judging them. I just thought the family missed a teachable moment.

Both children should have been taken aside and appropriate boundaries should have been explained. The girl was most vulnerable because of her age and her personal boundaries were likely violated. She needed to have a thorough explanation about personal boundaries. She evidently experienced joy while she wrestled with her cousin and any feelings she had at the time need to be part of the conversation. Certainly no guilt should be imposed, but a healthy sense that she must not allow boys to wrestle with her at any time or to touch her inappropriately should be the end result of the discussion.

The teenage boy should be told he must not touch girls or “wrestle” with them because it violates their personal boundaries. His motives and his understanding of appropriate treatment of girls should be explored. It is conceivable that because his family witnessed his physical interaction with his cousin and did not disapprove, he will think that he can behave in a similar manner with other girls and could find himself accused of unwanted sexual behavior. He must understand the consequences of his behavior.

Some parents or other teaching adults are probably wondering, “What do I say?” I suggest that you find books that discuss sexuality at age appropriate levels, read them and select what you believe is helpful. If necessary, use what you have read as the base of your discussion. Look for teachable moments and address issues that are sometimes difficult. Have the conversations about proper boundaries before you find two cousins “wrestling” on the floor.