

Managing Confidentiality by Syler Thomas
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“So I’ve been smoking with some friends lately.” The seriousness with which Jared was sharing this with me suggested that he wasn’t talking about cigarettes. “You mean you were smoking pot?” “Yeah.” Then a pause. “You’re not going to tell my parents I smoked, are you?”

How does one respond to a question like that? We all know that as youth workers, we are not to take the place of parents, but to help them raise their children. Would I want to know it if my kids were smoking pot? Of course. But what role does confidentiality play? Are we bound by legality or morality to break confidence in a situation like this?

I’m sure it’s just that I’m getting older than I realize, but it does seem like even the good kids these days are finding it harder and harder to stay away from compromising situations. If we go to the parents every time we hear something, word will get around quickly that “you can’t open up to the youth pastor—he’ll just squeal.” But if we sit on information about a student who is engaging in illegal or dangerous activity, something worse could happen. Where do we begin?

LEGALLY SPEAKING

In terms of the legality of this issue, pastors are surprisingly protected in ways that even licensed therapists are not. Your state may have different laws, but generally speaking, the courts have made it clear that they wish to encourage parishioners to be open with their ministers, so you need not fear the legal ramifications of pastoral confidentiality. Of course, common sense tells you that if you know of or suspect abuse or the imminent threat of a student to injure themselves or another, the proper authorities should be contacted immediately. Having said that, the question remains about what to do with the information students offer you that falls into a gray area. The reality is that Jared isn’t in any immediate danger by smoking pot a few times, but it’s also clear that he is making neither a legal nor a healthy choice. And it’s only a matter of time before this poor choice could lead to much more dangerous ones. And what about the issue of students’ cutting themselves, not to attempt suicide, but as a means of self-mutilation? While each crisis situation does indeed have its specific dos-and don’ts, I don’t have the space to address each. My question is only: generally speaking, what do we do with the information presented to us?

ESTABLISHING TRUST

Welcome to walking the fine line between being their friend and showing them “tough love.” Many have walked this road before you and there is carnage on both sides of the line. On one side of the line, you find youth workers that have committed themselves so deeply to being a student’s friend that they have lost any ability to speak truth. One youth worker I read about even convinced himself that getting high with students was the only way he could truly reach out to them.

On the other side of the line are those who never seem to have students open up to them because the minute anything controversial comes up, the parents are called, trust is

broken, and the opportunity to make a difference is lost. There's a reason why they're talking to us and not the parents. We have to take our role seriously, and be willing to navigate this line with wisdom and with care.

The best case scenario is that if a student wants to meet with you to talk about personal issues, you should set up some sort of ground rules for a series of counseling sessions. For instance, tell the student what he or she can expect from you, namely that you will not break confidentiality unless you feel that they are going to harm themselves or someone else. One counselor I spoke to promises that there will be no surprises. In other words, he will not report anything to the parents without first letting the student know, and will only do so if he feels it's necessary. This is a judgment call, but at least the student knows what to expect. For your own protection and to help you keep track of your sessions, you should keep password-protected counseling notes.

Conceptually speaking, you need to keep in mind that you are only one part of the solution to helping this student out, and that the parents *must* be another key part of this solution. If there are parents in the picture at all, we should continually be looking for ways to encourage the student to open up and share what's happening with them, even if it's at a surface level. You may want to set up a meeting with the parents, not to squeal, but to try to ask questions about what's going on at home. The student's school counselor might also be another resource for the situation.

In terms of advising your adult volunteers in how to handle a situation like this, empower them to handle it themselves as long as they feel comfortable, but make sure that they keep you informed very regularly. They will likely need your help, and you can offer further resources such as counselors or church leaders that can provide wisdom as well. If at any point you or they feel they are in over their heads, don't be afraid to step in. And if a situation is quite serious, you should also keep your own immediate supervisor in the loop.

THE CODE OF SILENCE

Recently, a student in our youth ministry was dealing with severe depression and making some extremely unhealthy choices, and several of his close friends in the ministry knew about it, yet their unspoken "code of silence" kept them from telling anyone about it, until he finally attempted suicide. Thankfully, he survived and is receiving professional attention now, but it could have been utterly tragic, and none of his friends was willing to step forward, because no one wanted to be the "rat."

In light of situations like this, we all need to teach our students about the importance of taking action when they are dealing with friends who are heading down an unhealthy path. We should encourage them first that true friends are willing to *confront* loved ones when they know they're hurting themselves. Students are often too immature to recognize when confrontation is necessary. Or else, they're so concerned with their reputation that the fear of being a rat or a narc (yes, high schoolers still use that word) will keep them quiet. So we must teach our students that their fear of God must outweigh their fear of man, and we must create a culture that values loving student-to-

student confrontation. Finally, if that isn't effective, students should be encouraged to bring an adult into the loop.

And then we must remember that if we are the adult that is contacted, it's now up to *us* to do something about it. The government has been running a string of very effective ads encouraging students to take action about a friend's drug problem, and taking this information to a responsible adult is sometimes the best a student can do. *You* have now become the responsible adult. Failure to act at this point is simply unacceptable.

If you're looking for additional resources related to combating drug use, the best ones I've come across are our government's anti-drug websites, one for parents (www.theantidrug.com) and one for students (www.freevibe.com). You should also have available a list of counselors in the area to whom you can refer those interested.

DEALING WITH RUMORS

Rumors are a sticky issue, because we just don't know when they're true and when they're not. "Everybody knows that Tammy smokes pot every weekend," you'll hear. Your response should be: "Have you or one of Tammy's friends talked to *her* about it?" If they are genuinely concerned about the party in question, then their concern should lead them to ascertain the rumor's authenticity. You can cause *more* problems by taking every rumor at face value and taking action based on it. If the rumor isn't true, and you call Tammy's parents, they get upset and Tammy gets in trouble for no reason. This also teaches students two lessons you don't want to teach: 1) that sharing rumors with the youth pastor gets the "naughty kids" in trouble and 2) if the youth pastor confronts their peers, then they never have to.

WHEN CONFIDENTIALITY MUST BE BROKEN

There are times when the gray issue becomes quite black and white. In such a situation, swift action must be taken. For instance, if you are certain that a student has moved beyond "experimentation" and is using an illegal drug regularly or is engaging in the sale of drugs, parents must be notified. In this situation, depending on your relationship with the student, you may want to let them know you are going to the parents, especially if they'll likely find out anyway. Or you could offer them twenty-four hours to tell their parents themselves, or offer for them to go with you. If a student is talking seriously about taking his own life, it's also time for action. Remember that parents will always forgive you for erring on the side of caution. In the case of a student that you know or strongly suspect is being abused by his parents, huddle with a trusted church leader who can help you report it. Defending the defenseless must be a priority.

And what about Jared? Here's my response: "No, I'm not going to tell your parents. Not now, anyway. And I'm glad you trusted me to tell me about what you've been doing—I really appreciate that. But as someone that cares about you, it would be unloving of me to fail to tell you that smoking pot is a road to nowhere. Do you know much about why marijuana is so dangerous?" And then I'd ask him some questions about his relationships: with God, with parents, and with friends.

Unfortunately, there are few hard and fast rules. Crisis situations are complicated and must be navigated with prayer, with wisdom, and with the help of trusted advisers. It's one of the least tidy parts of the job but potentially one of the most important.