

How Should Teachers Handle Tattling?

In this thoughtful *Responsive Classroom* article, Margaret Berry Wilson describes a mistake that many well-meaning teachers make: to avoid the annoyance and wasted time of dealing with students who are constantly telling on each other, they have a rule against tattling. Wilson believes this approach ends up causing more problems than it solves. It creates a “culture of silence” about misbehavior and sending children a confusing message – *Adults say they care, but they won’t listen to my problems*. In many schools, bullying festers because students think they’re not supposed to speak up. “Above all,” says Wilson, “children need to know that when someone’s behavior worries them, adults will listen.”

Why is there so much tattling? Students may have legitimate concerns about other children’s behavior. They may be testing the teacher’s limits and trying to find out whether certain rules will be enforced. They may be seeking attention and recognition for following the rules. Or they may lack the problem-solving skills to handle the issue themselves. Here are Wilson’s suggestions for a better way to handle tattling:

- *Teachers should explain their expectations about tattling up front.* Acknowledge that others may have a rule against tattling, but there are many times when it’s important for students to tell about behaviors they’re noticing.

- *Help students know when to report incidents.* Students might brainstorm incidents and decide which “bucket” they go into: Tell an adult, Handle it yourself, or Let it go.

The class should review and add to the list at regular intervals, and children should get the message that when in doubt, they should tell an adult. There might also be a nonverbal signal that students give the teacher when they’ve handled an issue on their own or let it go.

- *Respond respectfully to tattlers.* Even when a report is inappropriate (for example, telling on a classmate who isn’t lined up properly), acknowledge it with a statement like, “Oh, you’re right. I did say that’s how we should line up. I’ll watch more carefully next time.”

- *Let students report incidents privately.* Some teachers keep “conversational journals” for messages or a box into which students can place confidential communications. These give students a way to pass the word to their teacher without interrupting instruction or exposing themselves to retaliation.

- *Help parents understand and support the approach being used.* Some parents may need to be guided to a more nuanced approach to tattling. Others may need to be dissuaded from telling their children to report every little thing to the teacher. Parent meetings, the weekly newsletter, or the school or class website are a good forum for this kind of explaining.

- *Give students positive ways to win recognition.* Some students tattle to get attention, and they need other avenues – perhaps showcasing a talent at a morning meeting.

- *Teach conflict resolution.* “If you expect students to address problems independently, you must teach them how,” says Wilson.

“What to Do About Tattling” by Margaret Berry Wilson in *Responsive Classroom*, April 2011 (Vol. 23, #2, p. 8-10)