



# THE KILLER

**THERE'S AN ASSASSIN IN YOUR GROUP THAT WILL KILL THE KIND OF SAFE, FRIENDLY ATMOSPHERE YOUR KIDS CRAVE. DO YOU KNOW ITS NAME?**

**BY JEANNE MAYO**

**Ever climbed up to your church's rooftop and used a feather pillow to counsel a teenager? I have.**

I've been a youth minister for more than three decades. Early on, I identified the #1 killer stalking my group—it had no association with kids' culture and no connection to the "big three" moral threats (sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll). This was an inside job—the enemy behind so many pious smiles. Its name was Gossip.

One chilly October afternoon, I grabbed a feather pillow and a pair of scissors and instructed two of our more popular youth group girls to follow me up a ladder to the roof. First they laughed at me, then they climbed. After we caught our breath, I said, "Okay, ladies, would you be so kind as to take these scissors and cut open this feather pillow for me?"

The girls glanced awkwardly at each other and then began cutting away. Feathers immediately started to fall out and were caught up by the wind. One of the girls quickly tried to close the opening. "No, that's okay," I coached her. "I'd like for you both to shake the pillow now so the feathers can fly all over."

Their faces, once smiling and giddy, were now serious. I think they were beginning to realize that our rooftop session was not just for fun. With puzzled looks in their eyes, they began to shake the open pillow over the edge of the church. The fall wind sent feathers flying in countless directions. Within minutes, all of them had disappeared. The girls stood holding the empty pillowcase, wondering what was next.

"Now ladies, I have just one more instruction," I continued.

"Please leave this rooftop and gather up all the feathers you >>>



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»» turned loose in the wind." The girls just awkwardly stared at me.

"That's impossible!" one of the girls finally blurted out.

"It sure is," her friend chimed in. "We can't collect all those feathers, Jeanne. The wind has blown them to places we'll never even know."

"Exactly," I answered firmly. "And that's just what's happened to your gossip about Melinda. Your negative words about her have blown all over the youth group. She's pretty broken up — she knows she can't possibly chase down all the rumors and set the record straight. Do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

Only the sound of the fall wind broke the silence. The girls dropped their heads, speechless. I'd already tried on two earlier occasions to correct their "gift of gab," but without lasting success. The rooftop illustration was my last-ditch effort to help them understand how damaging their gossip had been.

### Why so serious?

Almost two-thirds of Christian teenagers (73 percent) surveyed by **group** Magazine a few years ago said "a welcoming atmosphere where you can be yourself" was the key reason they'd commit, and stay committed to, a youth ministry. And almost as many kids (70 percent) said "quality relationships with other teenagers" was their top commitment carrot.<sup>1</sup>

If your youth group is riddled with gossip, I guarantee your kids aren't experiencing these top two wants. It's a killer—a cancer spreading throughout your youth group.<sup>2</sup> Here are my observations about gossip drawn from my years in youth ministry:

● **Teenage girls gossip much more frequently than guys.** This isn't a slam against girls, and I know this isn't true in every case. However, adolescent girls are more prone to be gossips because of deep emotional issues that often create the problem.

● **Gossip is rooted in either jealousy or insecurity.** If you understand the root, you'll be much more successful in dealing with it.

● **Teenagers often learn to be gossips at home.** Many teenagers who talk negatively about others have grown up in homes where gossip is an everyday practice.

● **If the information is true, kids don't consider it to be gossip.** Many times when I've confronted teenagers about something they've said, their defensive reply is, "But it was the truth!" That makes no difference—Scripture instructs us to not talk negatively about others. There are three acceptable responses to negative information about someone. >>>

**1** For a full report on group's "Cool Church" survey, check out "The Cool Church" in group's May/June 2001 issue. If you're a subscriber, you can access articles from back issues of group by going to [www.groupmag.com](http://www.groupmag.com), clicking on Back Issue Archive, and then searching for the article title.

**2** The book of Proverbs uses some vivid language to describe people who gossip. Proverbs 25:23 calls them "backbiting" and Proverbs 26:20 labels them "talebearers." The picture of someone sneaking up behind another person and literally taking a bite out of the person's back is both funny and gory. The word "talebearing" conjures images of Paul Revere's ride, but instead of a life-giving message, it's full of character assassination.

» 1. We may go directly to the person in question and tell our concern.

2. We may keep our mouths shut and treat the issue as a topic for sincere prayer.

3. We may take the information to a trusted spiritual leader who has the wisdom to orchestrate any needed follow-up action.

Unless you're a part of the scriptural answer to the situation, you don't need to be involved.

## Taking aim at the killer

If you want to create a youth ministry culture of authentic friendship and growth, you'll have to show gossip the back door. Easier said than done, I know. But here are my simple how-to's for dealing with gossip.

### 1 Get your key influencers on your side.

Create an epidemic of positive verbal change in your youth ministry by making a list (short or long) of influential students who you need to get on your team. Take each of these folks out for pizza or coffee and make your appeal. Tell them you need their help in changing your youth group's culture from gossip-friendly to gossip-free. Describe your goal—a pervasive atmosphere of warmth and encouragement. Don't be negative or sound too preachy in your comments, and be sure to ask for any suggestions they might have to offer.

Not too long ago I had to deal with a pocket of gossip that was traced back to three girls. I went to the three girls individually to discuss the problem with them. I made sure my tone of voice was loving and understanding so they wouldn't feel defensive. I

told them I knew sometimes we all say things about others that are negative, and at times we feel insecure, and that makes us talk about others behind their backs. I explained to each of them that I knew they didn't mean to purposefully hurt anyone, but their names had come up several times, and one particular person had been quite hurt. I asked them if they'd be willing to help stop the pattern of gossip in the youth group.

Two of the three did get a little defensive, but I remained loving and direct. In those types of conversations, it's best to keep mentally saying, "Don't react; respond." Using "we" statements instead of "you" statements creates bridges of understanding that can make your efforts more effective.

### 2 Create a meeting that's focused on gossip.

You could title the meeting "Lessons From a Feather Pillow"! Begin the evening by showing a video of yourself and another student on top of a roof holding a pillow. Re-enact my opening true story with your own fictional characters. After showing the video, begin your talk with a feather pillow in hand. Have two or three students who've been hurt by gossip tell how it affected them. Invite a student who's trying to break the gossip habit to talk about his or her struggle to change. At the conclusion of the meeting, use a fan to blow the feathers all over the room. Ask your students to each retrieve one of the feathers. Then have them pray with the feathers in their hands, asking God to help them change.

### 3 Ask God for the courage to confront kids more seriously.

As I mentioned, my trip to the rooftop with those two girls »»

## GOSSIP'S

Gossip isn't our only dangerous enemy—its ugly cousin is sarcasm. Today's youth culture so loves humor that sarcasm is often viewed as a youth ministry friend rather than a foe, yet it's a "humor at any price" philosophy. Sarcasm mixes a measure of truth, then wraps it in barbed humor at someone else's expense. I've known many "cool" youth leaders who are quite adept at using sarcasm to communicate with teenagers. Proverbs 26:18-19 describes this behavior well: "Like a madman shooting firebrands or deadly arrows is a man who deceives his neighbor and says, 'I was only joking!'"

## kissin' cousin

Because affirming words are often awkward for people to verbalize, they use sarcasm to communicate friendship and warmth instead. I remember years ago saying to one of my favorite leaders, "Barry, you're amazing. But could you think about dropping the sarcasm from your humor?" He paused for a moment and then responded sincerely, "Jeanne, if I cut all the sarcasm out of my vocabulary, I'd probably be completely quiet for the next month!"

I don't think Barry's problem is uncommon. Sarcasm comes pretty easy for most of us. I don't think it's wrong to poke fun at situations or circumstances, but I think we cross the line when our sarcasm is centered on another person. We don't intend to hurt them, yet time and time again our words cut like a knife.

As I train youth leaders around the nation, I repeatedly tell them: "Please have the guts to drop the sarcasm when you joke around with your students. Train yourselves, as awkward as it might feel at first, to become a person who affirms others with your words. Though none of your teenagers will ever say it to you, they want your approval so much that they inwardly remember almost everything you say about them. You may know you're joking, but they don't."

»»» was not the first time I'd dealt with them about gossip. My previous efforts didn't get the job done. The next step is direct, loving confrontation. Don't assume that by dedicating a youth group meeting to the topic, gossip will just go away. Ask God to give you the courage to directly address the key offenders in your group. The long-term damage to the unity of your youth ministry will be greater than you think if you look the other way and pretend nothing is going on.

#### **4 Ask an offending student to take time away from your youth group.**

Many youth leaders wonder about when—or if—it's acceptable to ask a teenager to leave the youth group. Even though it's painful to do, after more than three decades in youth ministry I've learned the incredible value of telling a young person that he or she needs to stay clear of youth functions for one to three months. This extreme measure should only be taken when a student refuses to change his or her behavior and the conduct is a disruption to the entire group.

When I have to take this extreme measure, I mentally remind myself of what I call The Inoculation Principle. We can unknowingly "inoculate" students *against* the thrill of a real relationship with Christ by allowing them to come to our youth meetings, cause problems, and never truly listen to the claims of Christ. Little by little, they build up an "immunity" to the Lord by getting used to the experience of the group without taking the gospel message seriously. It would've been far better for everyone if they'd stayed home until they could abide by basic behavioral guidelines.

Some might ask, "Jesus left the 99 sheep in the fold to go after the one—wouldn't kicking a kid out be violating this principle?" My answer is simple: Leaving the 99 for the one is not the same as *sacrificing* the 99 for the one.

### **Your role in creating a safe, inviting atmosphere**

I often remind our youth leadership team, "Don't pull the weeds without planting the flowers." The best way to remove negative behavior is to replace it with something positive. You can overcome gossip by creating a positive culture of verbal affirmation and encouragement. Jesus didn't just tell his followers what *not* to do. He always clearly outlined the positive alternative he wanted them to use to replace the negative.

We teach what we know, but we reproduce who we are. To put it bluntly, your youth ministry will mirror your own conversation style. That's why it's imperative that you train yourself (and your adult leaders) to search for positive things about everyone you meet. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Each [man] is incomparably superior to his companion in some faculty," and the Bible tells us to consider others better than ourselves.

In the 1930s, Dale Carnegie gave up his career as a salesman to design and teach a course about relating well with others. He taught the class at a YMCA in New York City, and it became very successful and widely attended. One night a publisher attended



his class and persuaded Carnegie to put his course materials into a book. That book, titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, was on The New York Times best seller list for 10 years. It's still a big seller today.

What underlies Dale Carnegie's human relationship theories? He summed it all up in this principle: "Be hearty in your approbation and lavish in your praise." In short, Dale Carnegie taught that successful leaders train themselves to search for honest, positive things they can communicate to others. That truth is quite applicable to youth ministry. I'm not saying never correct or admonish. But whatever behaviors you reward with praise and encouragement will get repeated.

So if you want a positive culture of affirmation and fun in the midst of a backbiting society, it all begins with *you*. Study Proverbs and compile a list of verses that apply to gossip and put-downs. Use the list in your daily time with God, asking him to change your own gossip habits.

Once you've addressed your own heart, determine to be far more proactive about gossip in your group. Monica Neal, an Arkansas youth worker, says: "One time I was with a few girls and another leader from youth group. One of the teenagers began to gossip about one of their friends. Immediately I turned to the leader beside me and began to gossip about my best friend. The girls stopped talking and looked at me like, 'What are you doing?!' I turned to them and said, 'Obviously that wasn't true, but if you're shocked to hear me say something like that about one of my friends, you should think twice about what you're saying about *your* friend.' "

That's just the kind of frontal assault required to root out gossip by its wretched neck and toss it out the door. Once your kids experience your group as a safe place, they'll begin to drag their true selves into the light, where real growth can begin. ■



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