Neighbors Calling Cops On Kid Selling Cookies Speaks To Bigger Societal Ail

By Jamie Wells, M.D. — August 7, 2018

It seems lately that there isn’t a week that passes without a viral social media story or news account of a neighbor calling the police on a child, albeit one selling lemonade or mowing lawns. The most recent is that of a 10-year-old girl selling homemade cookies in Iowa in an effort to buy school clothes. Three complaints by neighbors were made to local police. Two cited an increase in traffic on the street that was imperiling playing children, including one’s daughter’s near-miss of being hit by a car. Another suggested child services be involved. Not once did anyone engage in a conversation with the aspiring baker Savannah Watters or her mother. What once was pretty standard in communities, an adult speaking to the child’s parent about their concerns, has all but evaporated in our culture. Due to the daily coarsening of civil discourse on social media, routine conflict resolution has gone out the window and this new path of immediate escalation through direct contact with third party authority or obtaining often out-of-context “gotcha” video has supplanted a once very desirable trait.

Is technology, whether texting on the phone or interacting online, impairing our ability to cope with run-of-the-mill minor conflicts and effectively communicate with one another? If we have forgotten how to be neighbors and are impotent at resolving the small stuff, then how will we manage the larger issues that are life-threatening or dangerous?

Or, are we so addicted to conflict and the accompanying notoriety in our social media age that we crave more of it from the start?

Whatever the culprit, the behavior is imprinted in the minds of the children involved. They mimic what they see. The relationship between parent and child is symbiotic. If mom is upset, child will
be upset. If mom avoids conflict, then the child learns this strategy too; becoming ill-equipped in adulthood to be resilient. Certainly, if there is a real threat to a situation, then the best, safest course is to contact the police. But, for an average annoyance when having a conversation doesn’t risk your or your child’s personal safety, shouldn’t attempts to diffuse or solve the problem yield greater dividends than the alternative (e.g. establishment of a nice rapport with your long-term neighbors, learning about rectifying challenging circumstances)?

The mainstream (as well as social) media tends to frame these tales with winners and losers. Sadly, all too often that is not correct. For instance, the woman whose daughter was almost hit by a car due to the newly increased traffic using their family’s driveway for turns has a legitimate worry. Savannah and her mother had no opportunity to demonstrate compassion or empathy for their neighbors concerns. What could have been a memorable, bonding moment between neighbors, opening a future friendly relationship was never put to the test. Instead, the child was hurt and the mother was thrust into an unwanted spotlight.

Did this eventuality help or ultimately harm the community; did it foster feelings of good will? No. And, that experience, which has a cumulative effect, impacts choices and decisions down the line.

Have we simply lost the benefit of the doubt entirely – and is that the world we want to live in? Maybe when we confront such situations, we can take a moment to consider whether our actions facilitate opportunities or impose obstacles.

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