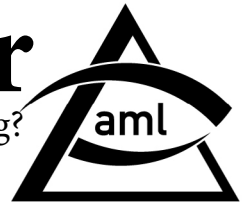


# Talkin' Misbehaviour

How might parents and teachers discuss leaders' questionable role modeling?

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Parents and teachers work very hard to encourage positive social values. They constantly discuss appropriate behaviours in a variety of situations to help their children successfully navigate challenges in their classroom, extracurricular and online lives.

These careful and constant efforts are weakened by news reports of leaders' inappropriate behaviours, especially when those behaviours avoid official sanctions.

The last several months have been quite troubling for parents and teachers who expect their leaders to be models of truth and responsibility.

Beginning in early 2013, the Canadian Senate was the site of a string of accusations, denials, misuses of funds, cover-ups, disclosures, blaming and resignations that reached to the House of Commons and the Prime Minister's Office.

In the fall, the long-time feud between then Mayor Rob Ford, Councilor Doug Ford and *The Toronto Star* turned into seemingly unending revelations, denials, admissions, apologies, contradictions and attacks when then Police Chief Blair announced the recovery of a 'crack video' that the newspaper had reported months earlier but had been unable to produce.

How might parents and teachers respond when students ask how leaders can behave and speak untruthfully, especially without penalties?

How can they explain the fact that some people (drivers, assistants, chiefs of staff, legislators) are penalized for their actions while their superiors are not? What are some key discussion strategies that might help people understand the meaning of these events? What life lessons might be gleaned from the discussions?

Following are some strategies that ***The Association for Media Literacy*** hopes might help parents and teachers talk to children and teens about ethics, role models, setting examples and their own responses to news of misbehaviour.

## Guidelines for discussion

### Before

Set guidelines or protocols for the discussion, including how much time you want to spend. Choose a time and a place that will be free of interruptions, either from activities or screens. Explain that the purpose of the discussion is to understand controversial and confusing events. Agree to exclude judgmental labels or putdowns. Allow everyone an opportunity to speak but respect those who do not want to speak.

Agree that the discussion is confidential, i.e., people's statements will not be shared beyond the discussion without their permission.

### Establish Facts

Ask participants what they have heard or seen. Sort the facts from the judgmental statements, confusions and/or inaccuracies.

Take time to research and verify suspect statements. Explain that the facts and the non-facts are equally important to the discussion but that people need to know which is which.

List the facts and judgmental statements.

### Establish Feelings

Ask participants to describe the feelings that they associate with the events, both factual and confusions/inaccuracies.

Ask why they might feel this way.

Explain that part of the discussion is to discover what might cause the feelings.

Explore the range of people's possible reactions to the facts, confusions and/or inaccuracies: shock, anger, fear, withdrawal, fatigue, acceptance, adjustment. Consider why some of these reactions have occurred.

### Processing

Pursue whichever of the following questions arise from the participants' concerns, questions, and feelings.

Omit questions that are not immediately relevant, but address those that might help participants to understand the issues.

Modify the questions to match the maturity and intellectual development of the participants.

The questions are clustered by topic. You might decide to deal with only one or two clusters or you might decide to deal with all questions, but with different clusters at different times.

Do NOT discuss all the questions at any one time.

*What are our family's/school's values?*

*What are appropriate behaviours in our home/school?*

*What are inappropriate behaviours in our home/school?*

*How might we respond to inappropriate behaviours in our home/school?*

*How might we respond to lying in our home/school?*

*What is a role model?*

*What do people expect of role models?*

*For whom might elected or appointed officials be role models?*

*How do governments represent officials as role models?*

*How might news reports contribute to making officials seem like positive role models?*

*How might news reports contribute to making officials seem like negative role models?*

*What is crack cocaine?*

*What is a crack house?*

*What are the effects of using crack cocaine?*

*What is a drug dealer?*

*What is a drug deal?*

*Why is dealing drugs illegal?*

*Why is smoking crack illegal?*

*What are vodka and brandy?*

*What are the effects of using vodka and brandy?*

*Should people who smoke crack be role models?*

*Why?*

*Should public officials be drunk in public or smoke crack? Why?*

*Mayor Ford admitted to smoking crack cocaine and to being drunk in public.*

*Why might he have used crack and alcohol?*

*How might using crack and alcohol affect his ability to be an effective mayor?*

*Should Mayor Ford have resigned after admitting to illegal drug use or public drunkenness? Why?*

The WWW and many news outlets presented videos, some of them privately recorded, of Mayor Ford's activities.

*What inferences/assumptions might people make about Mayor Ford as a result of seeing those videos?*

*How would you feel if it was you in those videos?*

*What do you think your parents or friends might think of you if they saw you in those videos?*

*Is it ever OK to lie?*

*Are there big lies and little lies?*

*Do people ever lie to be kind?*

*What is 'spin?' (A public relations term that means interpreting information—statistics, actions or ideas—to favour a specific point of view.)*

*What does it mean to 'spin an event?' (Interpreting or describing statistics, actions or ideas to make them look better or worse, more innocent or guilty, than they really are.)*

*How might Rob Ford's speeches in November, 2013 have used spin?*

*Was anyone else 'spinning' the event? (Ford family members, news reporters, witnesses, councilors, the police chief, etc.) How?*

*How might Stephen Harper's actions and speeches in 2013 have involved spin?*

*Was anyone else 'spinning' the event? (Senators, opposition leaders, dismissed staffers, reporters, the RCMP, police, etc.) How?*

*Is it ever OK for leaders to lie?*

*Should our expectations of leaders be greater than what we expect of one another?*

*How might leaders' lies affect people's trust and willingness to support them?*

*What penalties are appropriate for leaders who lie to their constituents?*

*Is there a double-standard in Canada? I.e., do penalties apply unevenly to people's behaviours, so that people are penalized unevenly?*

*Why do you think there might be different penalties for different people?*

*Do you think that some people may have suffered more penalties because they are not rich? Why?*

*Do you think that some people may have suffered more penalties because they are not white? Why?*

*Do you think that some people may have suffered more penalties because they are not born in Canada? Why?*

*Do you think that some of the people in the scandal might have been treated differently if they were women? Why?*

Mayor Ford accused the news media of picking on him without justification.

*Is it a good thing that news media report on leaders' activities, or should the news media ignore their actions and be reporting on other news?*

*Might the mayor's large physical size have been a reason for him thinking that news media were picking on him?*

*Do media reports occasionally make fun of or include references to leaders' physical appearances?*

*Could references to physical appearances in news reports be prejudicial, or a form of bullying?*

*What life lessons might people learn from reflecting on leaders' actions and statements?*

*What additional questions would you like to ask or observations would you like to make?*

### **Closure**

Give each student the opportunity to make a final comment. You might prompt: *What question might you pose to or statement might you make to Mr. [official]?* Set a time and place for further discussion if requested. Otherwise, thank participants for their participation and suggest that they reflect on the discussion, inviting them to re-visit the issues at a later time or share the discussion with others to get their responses and input. They might also benefit from research to see what responses others have expressed about the issues.

### **Follow-up**

After time to reflect, ask participants if they would like to pursue additional issues or aspects of the discussion. Invite them to summarize what they have learned from the previous discussion.

### **Parent/Teacher's role in discussion**

#### **Do**

Be a role model for calm discussion and candid expression of feelings.

Take time to listen.

Be sensitive to signs of stress.

Be aware of different reactions and needs, according to students' ages.

Put the particular event in perspective by pointing out that the event is the result of specific circumstances, that it is not a common event, and that the news media, police and courts are working as they should to inform and address the issue.

Identify and discourage the beginnings of stereotyping to explain causes of crime, for example crimes associated with particular gender/racial/cultural groups.

#### **Don't**

Predict responses or be judgmental of responses offered. Discussion that becomes judgmental can discourage candid and sincere opinions.

Offer false reassurances.

Respond to anger with anger, but with calm and requests for peaceable responses.

#### **Conclusion**

The actions of several politicians have been troubling. They have even put some parents and teachers to the test when trying to help their children or students make sense of the flood of information.

These strategies and questions are intended to support parents' and teachers' efforts while developing children's or students' media literacy.

Based on discussion guidelines in *Responding to Media Violence*, Metro Toronto School Board.

Many thanks to Dede Sinclair and Michelle Solomon for suggestions in the development of this guide.

The Association for Media Literacy is a charitable organization that promotes and supports critical media literacy skills for all.

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