Tackling Flirting Among Tweens

Every school I’ve worked at, there comes a time when I feel it necessary to spend an hour or two speaking to a middle school class about the topic of flirting.

Somehow, along the way, our children pick up certain behaviors that are rife around them, behaviors that they see on TV, in school, just about everywhere. They do not know the right and wrong of these behaviors if we do not address them.

The first time your toddler told a lie, or the first time they picked up a candy from a supermarket aisle without your knowledge, you had to teach them the concepts of lying and stealing. But we then assume they will learn all other social concepts through osmosis, just by being around people. Unfortunately, that does not happen.

So, young tweens and teens go to school, meet other youth who might, in their eyes, be “really cool”. Under the natural flow of peer modeling, they start flirting. Do they actually think, right, I’m gonna flirt with this guy or that girl? No, they just do it without actively thinking about it. A smile here, a wink there, a naughty comment, a giggle.

As parents and educators, it is our duty to address the issue. We often shy away from these issues, thinking, well, it’s harmless enough. But the problem is that it is not. I am certainly not proposing that we should totally segregate our boys and girls. In this society, it’s a recipe for rebellion. Nor should we pull down the big bad wolf of religious punishments, because we will only teach them to resent our religion.

The way I tackle this problem is using what they will accept: discussions about anthropological and social norms. We start by defining what constitutes flirting: they are good about giving input on this one. We can also go through the dictionary and find out that it’s not just actions and words, but attitudes as well. Then we look through societies in history and find out that flirting has also an evolution history of its own. There was a time when the use of a fan had hidden meanings. Then again, there was a time when in certain societies (for example, high class society in 18th-19th century Europe), flirting was the standard ballroom behavior.

We then look at the purpose of flirting. When I ask what is the purpose of flirting, the kids are often thrown off guard: purpose? Purpose? Often, our children behave mindlessly, with no particular goal in mind; so they are surprised that there should be a purpose to something that is not even openly recognized. Most writings define two types of flirting, that with a goal and that without a goal. So when you say to the children, flirting is meant to lead to a more serious sexual involvement, they get scared. I immediately add that I do not think that is their goal. They are most probably involved in the second type: mindless flirting.

In which case I move on to the case of the mindless youth who get led to their demise. I give my story about the “Moutons de Panurge”. Rabelais, a French author, relates the story of Panurge, who wished to take revenge on the merchant Dindenault. Panurge bought the largest ram, then threw it overboard during a ship voyage. All other sheep, being sheep, then followed the example of the largest ram, and jumped overboard to their watery deaths. Supposedly, Dindenault, seeing his flock disappear, hung on tenaciously to the last one, and therefore also fell and drowned.

The expression, “moutons de Panurge”, describes people who have no will of their own and follow blindly a leader, who might not really know what he is up to.

So I ask the students whether they wish to be leaders in the future or blind followers. Do they want to flirt because others do so or do they want to think about the consequences of flirting, and make a conscious decision as to whether they really should be doing so? It’s not so much how much harm are you doing? It’s more: what do other people think about you?

Does one such workshop/discussion eradicate the problem on the spot? Not immediately. But it opens the door to further discussions, and that is a giant step forward.