

“They hit us every day,” a friend recalls. She’s telling about the teachers at the school she went to for a year as a young child. “Every day, they rapped our hands with rulers, and I hated it but I never told my parents.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Well, it’s funny -- years later when I was grown up I did mention it to my mother for some reason, and she was appalled. She asked me the same thing: why didn’t you say anything to us at the time? And I told her it was because I thought she already knew. I figured, my parents had chosen that school and sent me there, they must know what went on, and so it must be OK with them.”

I thought you knew. What a piercing accusation for a parent, or for anyone. When something bad is happening, to know and not to act is a terrible failing. It’s why incest survivors often feel betrayed not just by the parent who perpetrated the abuse but also by the one who didn’t intervene or leave or seek help. It’s why Jews remember not only the Nazis’ atrocities but also the inaction of President Roosevelt and others who knew but did nothing. In examples like these, “I didn’t know” seems a thin excuse. *How could you not have known*, we say, sensing that willful blindness and denial must be behind such ignorance.

Blindness and denial do exist in families, in communities. But the question of what adults should have or could have known can get very murky. Parents simply aren’t as omniscient as children imagine them to be. In many situations, parents truly don’t know what’s going on and maybe can’t even be expected to know. What a wrenching reminder of vulnerability for both adult and child. And a reminder of the limits of what we can do for each other.

I admit it: I pride myself on being good at picking up signals, putting pieces of the puzzle together, figuring out what people don’t come right out and say. I have a good track record at doing this; kids who confide in me know it and maybe even come to expect it. But pride is dangerous. Believing you know can sometimes be as much of a failing as not knowing. It was just when I thought I’d truly *gotten it* about Alexa’s cycle of bingeing and fasting that she admitted she’d been throwing up, too. It was just when I thought I had established a rapport with silent, wary Mara and we could begin talking

about sex that she announced she was pregnant. Surprises come all the time, and often they come just when you think you know what you're doing. When Dana, confessing the drug addiction she'd kept secret for months, said, "I thought you'd have figured it out," I felt the full weight of my helplessness and wondered if my history of intuition counted for anything at all.

I think again of my friend's story about the teachers and their rulers. I think of her mother, hearing the painfully simple explanation for her daughter's silence. "I'd certainly have done something, if only I'd known," I imagine the mother saying, and I can feel her surprise and regret. But I feel for the girl too, trusting in the wisdom of adults and assuming they would protect her from anything she didn't deserve, so that whatever they didn't protect her from must somehow be OK.

All the hopes we place in each other -- for trust, for safety, for help -- and all the ways we fail each other without meaning to! What a fall from innocence it is when parents realize that kids don't tell them everything and kids realize that parents don't know and can't protect them from everything. But then how moving it is, finally, when both sides approach each other again, somehow having managed to accept this fall. Aware of the limitations in the other's ability to tell and to know, we continue to try anyway. Try to explain ourselves anyway. Try to help anyway.

Originally published in *New Moon Network: For Adults Who Care About Girls*,
March/April 2001