



## **Building Trust in Your Relationship with Your Child and Teen**

**Being trustworthy means that you keep your word and others can rely on you. They know that whenever possible, you will do what you said you would do.**

- Trust is a concept that we must teach our children. It is a fundamental building block of child development, especially as children develop into teenagers.
- Trust is broken when an adult or child/adolescent acts in a way that doesn't meet the other person's expectations.
- Just as every child wants to be trusted, every parent needs to earn the child's trust by treating them with respect, following through on a promise, and standing firm in setting and enforcing boundaries.

### **Principles of Trust**

- Trust is a continuum – it ranges from full trust to no trust and everything in between. It is not just one or the other.
- Trust is earned – it can be damaged, and it can be repaired and re-built.
- Trust builds slowly and can be broken easily.
- When trust is broken, the relationship is damaged.
- As you see improved judgment you can give a little more freedom and privileges and see how the child does. Often being given more privileges inspires a child/teen to be more responsible and trustworthy.
- You need to determine how much to trust each child in each situation, and this is not always clear cut and obvious. You may trust them in certain situation and not others.
- If trust is broken repeatedly, it could be a signal that something else is going on and you may need to intervene.

## Teaching a Child/Adolescent to Become Trustworthy

### Teach the child:

- Stop and think before you make a promise to be sure you really want to and can do it
- Remember what you promise to do and do the things you promise
- Finish the job to completion
- Keep doing what you promised even when you feel like doing something else
- Be aware of things that could prevent you from keeping your agreement. There are obstacles such as promising more than you can deliver, being pressured by friends, being distracted, procrastinating, wanting to do something more fun, or being tired.

## Steps to Build Trust

1. The best way to teach trust is by modeling, not lecturing. Part of modeling involves keeping your promises.
2. Open the lines of communication – A calm conversation is the most effective way to react to broken trust. Have an open discussion about what trust is, how it is broken, what steps can be taken to rebuild the bonds. Understand each other's perspective and clear up misunderstandings. Trust is a two-way street. Both adult and child have responsibilities in reconnecting.
3. Explain the benefits – when adults trust the child, everyone benefits. Children/teens may earn privileges for trustworthy behavior.
4. Create a roadmap for success – telling a child/teen to do the right thing won't give them the specific information they need to meet your expectations. Explain which behaviors will diminish trust, and which will increase trust. Set specific guidelines that will help them meet your expectations.
5. Give positive reinforcement – praise positive behaviors with a simple thank you, a pat on the back, etc, and offer privileges and rewards as the child becomes more trustworthy.
6. Set reasonable expectations. Trust grows slowly, bit by bit with each good decision that is made. It is an ongoing process.

**Remember, there will always be bumps in the road to building trust. You will be making progress and suddenly something happens to break the trust down again. The ups and downs are all important parts of the process and even small failures can result in stronger bonds in the future. Sometimes children/teens need to take one step back before taking the next step forward. Both adults and children need to be willing to try and try again.**

### **When Trust is Broken**

- For every five times you do the right thing, it only takes one poor decision to undo the trust you've built. Both adults and teens break the other's trust when they behave differently than they promised. Adults lose the child's trust when they fail to set and enforce limits clearly and fairly, and resort to snooping to learn about the child's life.
- Understand that the child/teen will slip quite a few times before they are able to integrate trustworthiness into their character – this helps adults to be more accepting and less upset. Don't get personally insulted by your teen's betrayal of trust. Remember they are just learning about trust, and it will take a lot of practice to get it right. They probably do not fully understand why trust is so important.
- It's the adult's job to initiate the repair process. Have empathy for the teens – view the conflict from the child's point of view. Adults need to develop self-understanding – what behaviors are unacceptable? What feelings does the adult have when these behaviors occur? Be prepared that the teen may not be ready right away to restore the relationship. Be consistent with your approach and it will work.
- Be sure that consequences teach rather than punish. "I will never trust you again" is not a healthy response. It takes away hope that the child can make amends and re-gain your trust. Try to include the teen in determining a fair and appropriate consequence. Ask them what they think should occur following a betrayal of trust. Ask what they think happens when they betray your trust – don't tell them.

## Help the Child/Teen Rebuild the Trust

Accept the child's apology and allow them to make amends including:

- Compensation to the harmed party for damage done (eg, paying for something they damaged, apologizing)
- A definite plan for future behavior to avoid making the same mistake again
- Reconciliation with the person who was harmed to re-establish trust and mend the relationship.

Once the child speaks honestly and from their heart about trust and has made amends, you have accomplished your goal of helping them to understand the importance of being trustworthy. The fact that they have demonstrated that they have learned about trust can restore your trust in them. Affirm and congratulate teens when they are being more trustworthy.

If the child has not shown remorse or made amends, then you need to impose reasonable consequences, such as limiting privileges, until they have learned to take the breaking of trust seriously.

## Trust Building Activities

Try these trust-building activities with the children/teens:

### Communication Building

Many researchers agree that open communication is a significant factor in forming a positive and healthy relationship between parents and teens. This first exercise can help build communication because it allows adult and teen to practice effective communication skills and active listening.

Instructions:

- 1) Sit down with your teen in a quiet place where there will be no interruptions
- 2) Each participant needs a pen and a piece of paper
- 3) Write down (or draw) three things you like about the other person on your piece of paper and three things you would change
- 4) After you both are done, take the time to agree that you will both try your best to listen when the other person is talking, without interruptions, and that you will give the other person your undivided attention. Also agree that you both will do your best to react respectfully in the

discussion without becoming defensive, angry, or judgmental. Remember: this is an exercise to strengthen communication skills.

5) Take turns discussing what you both wrote down (or drew).

### **Analyzing an Event**

Often, it is hard to communicate about an event that has occurred, especially if it is negative, because we may not feel the other person understands or is listening to how we feeling wholeheartedly without judgment. This is a writing or drawing exercise that involves examining an event or situation that has occurred between adult and teen. The event could be either positive or negative.

Instructions:

- 1) Sit down in a quiet place with paper and pens
- 2) Without looking at each other's work, write 6 sentences (or draw pictures) reflecting how you feel about a particular situation or event that involves both parties
- 3) Read your sentences out loud to the other person
- 4) Have the other person try to guess what situation your writing is reflecting
- 5) Discuss your feeling with the other person and the significant impact the situation had on your life
- 6) Take turns doing this writing (or drawing) exercise

### **Practice Building Trust**

Practice trust building strategies through role plays where one person plays the child and one plays the adult.

Have a conversation about trust with the goal of preventing behaviors that break down trust. Incorporate the Steps to Build Trust from this lesson focusing on:

1. Have open communication, don't lecture. Discuss what trust means to each of you and how it is broken. Try to understand each other's point of view and clear up any misunderstandings.
2. Create a roadmap for success. Work with the child/teen to identify specific behaviors that will build trust, and those that diminish trust. Help them to identify potential obstacles. The trust building behaviors may be general and would apply to all children, or they may be specific to situations that apply to a particular child. Use the worksheet attached to clearly outline those behaviors.

When finished, help the child to complete the worksheet outlining your adult behaviors that build vs. diminish trust.

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Role play a situation where the child/teen has behaved in a way that has broken trust. Have an open discussion about how that feels for each of you. Remember the concept that there are often bumps in the road, and this situation can be used as a learning experience. Then, follow the steps described in the section "Help the Child/Teen Rebuild Trust" to calmly discuss:

- Possible compensation for damages (eg, do something nice for that person, pay for damages, apologize, etc)
- Plan for future to avoid the same mistake – what will you do differently next time?
- Ways to mend the relationship – how can you work to rebuild trust?

Now role play a situation in which the adult behaved in a way that has broken trust with the child/teen. Follow the same steps.

## Roadmap to Success

Builds Trust	Diminishes Trust
<b>Example:</b> When you tell me you have finished a job (homework, chores, etc.) you are being truthful.	<b>Example:</b> You are late coming home from school and don't have a good reason and I have no idea where you are or what you are doing.

