

# TRUST

## IN THIS SHEET

- **What trust really is**
- **The importance of trust**
- **Trust as part of a relationship**
- **How trust is different from blind faith**
- **Ideas for developing greater trust**
- **Rebuilding trust when it has been broken**

To trust people means to believe that they will act honestly and reliably and “do the right thing” in situations where they are responsible for their own actions.

As children move into the adolescent years, trust becomes more important.

Trust is not normally an issue with young children. Adults are with them at all times, responsible for supervising and making sure they are safe.

However, parents cannot be present in many everyday situations facing adolescents, such as getting home from school or going to sport or music lessons. They begin relying more on teenagers to be responsible for themselves. It is then that trust can become an issue.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST

Trust is important in adolescent-parent relationships because a high level of trust tends to bring out the best in teenagers. When teenagers feel they have the trust of their parents they are more likely to communicate openly and honestly as well as to stick to rules and parental expectations.

There is even research to show that teenagers who feel they are trusted are less likely to engage in high-risk or delinquent behaviours.

As children grow-up, it's natural that they gradually expect more freedom and independence. Teenagers, in particular, yearn for greater parental trust in their ability to make decisions for themselves. Fortunately, most

parents adjust their parenting to accommodate their child's growing independence, quite often without even noticing.

Sometimes adolescents will have different views from their parents on the appropriate age at which they should be granted independence in certain issues. Parents may be happy for a 14-year-old to go to a movie with a friend, but may be uncomfortable to allow an 11-year-old to do this. Often it is differences of opinion on simple day-to-day activities like this that lead to household disagreements involving trust.

Giving teenagers more freedom and loosening the reins is not easy for parents. Yet, it is an issue that has to be faced. A 'head-in-the-sand' approach is not the answer. Research shows that teenagers who are not given the chance to make decisions for

themselves are more likely to rebel.

On the other hand, the good news is that where parents are honest with their children, young people will take on values and behaviours similar to their parents.

## ONE PART OF A BIG PICTURE

Essentially, trust is a feature of a much bigger picture—a much broader relationship. In life in general, trust is developed between any two people over time, and it is based on the behaviour of individuals in a whole range of situations.

Perceptions of trust are important. Your positive feelings about your relationship with your child will be linked to trust.

Similarly, children's views of their relationships with parents are strongly related to the degree to which they feel trusted. A relationship with mutual trust will generally be more open and much more fulfilling for all parties.

In the parent-teenager relationship, trust is related to the quality of communication overall. Trust is fostered through shared information and the parent's knowledge of the teenager's daily activities.

Parent trust is likely to increase as adolescents show they can behave responsibly within the boundaries set for them.

A teenager's commitment to being trustworthy is influenced by the long-term accepted standards practised in the household. Through their example, parents can demonstrate how to be trustworthy in practical situations. For example, arriving home from work at the agreed time. If agreements or understandings are regularly broken for no good reason, children will soon recognise the lack of importance given to trust.

However, when parents are honest and reliable and stick to agreements, they show by actions and lifestyle that they value these traits. Being consistent and faithful to household rules or standards, gives young people confidence.

### Trust is not the same as blind faith

"You don't trust me!" is an accusation that is levelled at many parents by angry teenagers. Sometimes this reflects teenagers' frustration at not being given enough opportunities to make some decisions for themselves.

Other times, trust is being confused with rules. In reality, these are quite separate issues.

Rules are about appropriate behaviour. Some things will always be out of bounds for teenagers. Restrictions, such as a time for a teenager to come home, very often relate to safety,

or are simply to do with the smooth running of a household (e.g., a child must be home at a certain time to fit in with a planned family outing).

Sometimes parents say no, not because they don't trust their children to do their very best, but because they believe the young person may not yet be ready to deal with a particular situation without guidance. For example, parents might not permit their 14-year-old go to a party where there will be older teenagers drinking and no adult supervision. Letting someone do something that is beyond his or her abilities is not trust—it's simply blind faith.

Trusting children with greater levels of freedom means handing over to them more of the responsibility for decision-making. But learning to make sound decisions is a gradual process that requires knowledge, maturity and experience.

Good decisions involve rationally assessing the risks, benefits and alternative actions that are relevant in the particular case. Whilst teenagers are beginning to think more like adults, they often still need help from their parents to make decisions that have serious or long-term consequences. This is because teenagers are:

- Likely to be more impulsive
- Less concerned about risk

- Not thinking about the future
- More susceptible to peer pressure
- More concerned about physical appearance.

For these reasons, parents may wish to have a say in many decisions made by teenagers, mainly because of the situation and the lack of experience of the teenager. This has nothing to do with trust. The *Decision making and Responsibility Skill* sheets explains this in more detail.

## IDEAS

### Sharing information

There is no doubt your trust as a parent thrives when your teenager willingly discloses information. As much as possible, try to encourage positive two-way communication. When the time is right, and the atmosphere is positive, encourage your teenager to talk openly and honestly by listening without being judgemental.

How you react to information disclosed to you will normally determine how willing your child will be to continue talking. Obviously, if you laugh at teenagers, or immediately condemn their behaviour or the actions of their friends, your child will not be inclined to open up further.

It is also good to encourage teenagers to think deeply about issues and share their views and

ideas with you. Interesting issues that you can raise with them include peer pressure, media influence, future hopes and dreams, and long term consequences of actions.

### Creating trust

To create trust, it is important:

- To be available to listen
- To discuss issues
- To be non-judgemental, and
- To offer advice only when asked.

A good starting point is to assume that teenagers can be trusted unless they prove otherwise. Allow your teenager to gradually accept more responsibilities. Choose relatively "safe" things at first. Remember – they cannot demonstrate responsibility if they are not given the opportunities to do so. Be prepared for them to make mistakes, bear the consequences, and trust them to learn as they go along.

## TROUBLESHOOTING

### "My teenager is secretive"

In looking at trust, sometimes secrecy is a concern for parents. Adolescents are entitled to a certain amount of privacy but this can sometimes be perceived rather negatively as secrecy. It's normally best for parents to give teenagers space. A healthy level of secrecy is a natural part of adolescence and has been

shown to be associated with the normal development of personal autonomy.

### "My trust has been broken"

Be ready for disappointments. It is highly likely that your teenager will break your trust on some issue at some stage. You need to assess the severity of this breach. Often, for a once-off occurrence, showing your disappointment and providing an appropriate consequence will be enough punishment.

When trust has been broken, and you feel you cannot trust your teenager, let him or her know why and in what way.

Severe breaks of trust or repeated occurrences may require a restriction of freedom and closer monitoring until trust is re-established.

To rebuild trust, start by trusting your teenager with small responsibilities. Never say "I will never trust you again." However, let him or her know that rebuilding trust may be a gradual process.

To provide encouragement, make efforts to 'catch' your teenagers doing the right thing and then reward them for doing so.

For confidential information and advice call Parentline 13 22 89. Interpreters are available.

## SOURCES

Armsden, G.C. & Greenberg, M.T. (1987) The inventory of parent and peer attachment: Individual differences and their relationship to psychological well-being in adolescence. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 16, 427-454.

Borawski, E.A., Levers-Landis, C.E., Lovegreen, L.D. & Trapl, E.S. (2003). Parental monitoring, negotiated unsupervised time, and parental trust: The role of perceived parenting practices in adolescent health risk behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 33, 60-70.

Child and Youth Health (2004) Adolescence – When times get tough. South Australia: Child and Youth Health. Retrieved February 10, 2004 from [www.cyh.com](http://www.cyh.com)

Collins, W.A., & Repinski, D.J. (1994) relationships during adolescence: Continuity and change in interpersonal perspective. IN: Montemayor, R., Adams, G.R. et al. (Eds). *Personal relationships during adolescence. Advances in adolescent development. An annual book series. Vol 6, 7-36.* CA, USA: Sage publications, inc.

Department of Families, Government of Queensland (2003). Teenagers and young people. Retrieved February 10, 2004 from [www.families.qld.gov.au](http://www.families.qld.gov.au)

Dickey, S.B. & Deatrck, J. (2000). Autonomy and decision making for health promotion in adolescence. *Pediatric Nursing*, 26, 461-467.

Finkenauer, C., Engels, R.C.M.E. & Meeus, W. (2002). Keeping secrets from parents: Advantages and disadvantages of secrecy in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 31,123-136.

Kerr, M., Stattin, H. and Trost, K. (1999). To know you is to trust you: parents' trust is rooted in child disclosure of information. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22, 737-752.

Mouradian. W.E. (1999). Making decisions for children. *The Angle Othodontist*, 69, 300-305.

Waring, T. & Hazell, T. (1998). Effective communication with adolescents. Queensland: Hunter Institute of Mental Health. Retrieved February 10, 2004 from [www.himh.org.au](http://www.himh.org.au)

## Prepared by the Parenting Research Centre

© Victorian Government Department of Human Services