

Do You Trust Your Teen, and Does Your Teen Trust You? (Parts 1 and 2)

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There are two essential questions you must ask yourself when it comes to the role of trust in your relationship with your teenager. They are both important, but the second one is critical. They are:

1. Do I trust my teen?

2. Does my teen trust me?

In this article, I'm going to address the first question and in the coming days, the second.

I'm often asked by parents how to know if they can trust their teen. The answer is simple -- though not always easy.

It leads to a question of its own, actually. "You already know," I say. I usually let them sit with that for a moment, and follow up with, "What is your gut telling you?"

The real work is then twofold. First, listening to that "voice within" to hear what it's telling you. And second, knowing how to enter into intentional, positive conversations with your teen on the topic. This is something I believe all parents should do.

I want to make a few points about trust in general, and then share some thoughts on how to have the right conversations with your teen about it.

Trust is actually a simple concept in that you either trust somebody or you don't. It's a yes or no question. A caveat to bear in mind is that in close relationships (family members, friends, co-workers) we will often trust somebody in one way but not another. For instance, you may trust your teen to make good decisions at a party where there are drugs or alcohol, but you may not trust that he's doing his homework rather than watching YouTube when he's in his room "studying."

Also, the closer somebody is to us, the more complicated it is to get clarity on our gut feelings. Our emotions can collide with our reasoning ability and we get confused. For example, you might not trust that your son is being honest with you, but you second-guess yourself because if you say something he might get angry, and maybe it's just your own anxiety anyhow, and so on goes the dialogue in our heads.

Bearing those things in mind, how do you talk to your teen about trust? Again the answer is simple (though not always easy): calmly, openly and directly.

Trust should be an ongoing conversation you have that you bring up when a) you have concerns, or b) you want to praise them for being trustworthy, which is a good way to reinforce that behavior.



If you have concerns, here are some five suggestions for making that a positive conversation:

1. Pay attention to your timing.

Don't just spring it on them when you're feeling moved to do so. Try to catch them when they are in a calm, receptive mood. When is your teens more "open time"? Late evenings before bed? Late Sunday morning after sleeping in? Aim for a time when they're more relaxed and at ease.

2. Stay calm.

Calm parents = calm kids. Ok, most of the time. It may not be perfect math, but the calmer you are, the more you'll create the conditions for them to respond in kind.

3. Call their behavior into question, not their character.

State the facts about the specific behaviors or events that are creating concern. Be honest about how you're feeling. They need to hear that. But also let them know you believe in their character, but right now they have damaged your trust through some of their choices.

4. Let them know how to regain your trust.

Articulate what they can do to regain your trust. Tell them what specific behaviors you want to see to regain it (i.e. being home on time, being honest about where they are and who they're with, etc.).

5. Be willing to let it be unresolved.

Just because you talk about it doesn't mean you'll walk away trusting again. Trust isn't an intellectual process; you'll trust them again when you trust them. It's ok to let them sit with that reality.

Remember the conversation should be ongoing. Check in with them as needed to praise them for the good work done to repair the damage, and to be clear on what still needs attention.

As I mentioned there is an even more important question you should be asking: does my teen trust me? In part 2, I'll dig deep into that question and why it's so important.

In the first article of this series, I talked in detail about the first of two essential questions you must ask yourself when it comes to trust in your relationship with your teenager. They are:



1. Do I trust my teen?

2. Does my teen trust me?

While the first is obviously important, the second is crucial. Here's why:

Your teen is hard enough to control when she's sitting right next to you. When she's upstairs in her room or out with her friends, it's impossible to control her behavior or her choices. The *only* leverage you possibly have to *influence* her behavior is the strength of your relationship with her.

And while your perception of the strength of the relationship counts, it's her's that really matters. If she perceives it as strong and feels a genuine connection, she's much more likely to behave the way you'd like when you aren't around. She won't want to disappoint you.

What does this have to do with trust?

Everything.

A trusting relationship is a strong relationship.

This is why her trust in you is of the utmost importance. If the trust in your relationship is damaged and your connection is weakened, here are the questions I recommend you begin asking yourself immediately:

1. Does my teen trust I will be fair?

Even if they don't always recognize the difference between right and wrong, most teens I've worked with still have a keen sense about what is fair, and a lot of their trust is based on it. Even if he doesn't always agree with your rules and structure, if they're fair, that voice of reason will rise from the hinterland of his conscience and he'll get over it without too much difficulty. However, if your rules and their consequences are excessive, arbitrary or inconsistent, he will judge you as unfair and it will create distance in your relationship. He will trust you less.

2. Does my teen trust I will listen rather than lecture?

This is very important. If you can actually get your teen talking, you don't want to squash it with unsolicited advice. This is one of the key ways teenagers get annoyed with their parents. Lectures are like teen repellent. If you want them to run in the other direction, just "spray" them with a lecture, and voila, they're gone! So if they're talking, you should be listening -- and I mean really listening. Just like you know when they're looking you in the eyes but nobody is actually home, they too know when you're really present.

3. Does my teen trust I can see him for who he is rather than who I'd like him to be?



Every person has a dream for what their life will be. It begins when we're children, and we spend much of our lives working to make it a reality. Our dream includes what our career, love and family life and lifestyle will look like. For many it also includes a spiritual component that gives life a deeper meaning. But we also have a dream for our children: who they will be, what their strengths will be and what they'll accomplish. This is natural and normal. But at some point, our dream for their life has to give way to *their* dream. When they're teenagers, they increasingly need to know we're supporting their dream for their future. And especially if it's different from the one we have for them, they need feel acknowledged, respected and loved for the path they are on. If they get that from you, wholeheartedly, then the trust you want from them (and that they also want to have in you) will be a foregone conclusion.

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