

## Principles of Parenting

# Communicating With Your Teen: Trust

► Learn ways to establish and maintain trust in your parent-teen relationship.

Parenting involves allowing children to have more responsibilities and freedoms as they grow older. Generally speaking, the goal is to let go, and letting go requires trust. Trust means, *I can count on you to be honest, to follow through on your promises, and to treat me with respect.*

As teens get older they spend less time with parents and more time with friends, at work, and in other activities away from home. Since teens are spending more time in places where parents are not watching, parents have to trust them to make a lot of decisions. But parents often worry that their teens will make poor decisions when faced with choices or situations they might not be ready to handle.

Fear is a reason that parents may not trust their sons or daughters to make some decisions. Parents may fear their teens will be unsafe while driving the car, or will try drugs, or will become sexually active.

Trust is a balance between the fear of what might happen with the knowledge of past decision-making and responsibility taking. If a teen has always driven the car safely in the past, a parent may be willing to trust the teen to drive the car a longer distance.

Fear also can make it difficult for teens to trust their parents. Teens might fear that their parents will take away their freedom, try to control their lives, or embarrass them in front of their friends.

Trust is not a one-way street. It is not only the trust you have in your teen but also your teen's trust in you that allows the two of you to have a positive relationship with each other.

Trust makes it easier for your teen to talk with you when something goes wrong. Your teen must be able to set aside fear that you will be angry and to feel confident that regardless of what has happened, things can be worked out.



## What Does Trust Look Like?

**Teens need to show that they are trustworthy.** Teens must show that they are responsible, honest, and truthful for their parents to be able to trust them.

If your child has been trustworthy in the past and behaves in a trustworthy manner now, you are likely to believe that your teen will be trustworthy in the future. The opposite also is true. If your child has participated in problem behaviors in the past, you may not completely trust him or her in some present situations.

**Teens need to believe that you trust them.** If you trust your teens but do not show it by allowing them more responsibility and freedom, then they will think that you do not really trust them.

Sometimes when teens don't feel trusted, they wonder if it matters whether they behave responsibly. Giving teens more responsibility and making sure that they understand what gaining more responsibility means is important for teaching them the skills needed when they have jobs and families of their own.

**The trust that children have in you as a parent is important.** Teens' ability to trust you is based on how you have behaved in the past with them and how you have reacted to past information that they have shared. If you have not been faithful to a promise or failed to show respect for their feelings, they will have difficulty trusting you. But there are ways to help your teens trust you:

- Offer support in time of need. For example, if your son is upset with a friend and you support him by listening to his problems and do not break his confidence by talking to others about his problem, he will trust you more.
- Accept teens' feelings and views without making light of their experiences. When your daughter is devastated because her boyfriend of 3 weeks dumps her, and you take her feelings seriously instead of telling her the relationship was too short to matter, she will trust you more.
- Share your feelings. Teens will be more willing to share private feelings with you if they believe that you are willing to share your feelings with them. If you are honest with your teens about how you feel when someone has hurt your feelings or has made you angry, rather than pretending nothing ever bothers you, your teens will trust you more.



#### **What teens say about trusting their parents:**

*"Mom is always there to pick me and my friends up from soccer practice. She never forgets that it's her turn to pick us up on Wednesdays at 5:30 p.m."*

*"Dad told me I could borrow the car this weekend if I did all my chores. Even when Dad needed the car this weekend, he still let me use the car like he promised."*



#### **What parents say about trusting their teens:**

*"Frank asked me to let him go with friends to a concert 3 hours away. Frank is 16 and a good student. He has always shown good judgment, and I trust him to make good decisions. I let him go and was proud of him when he told me that he talked one of his friends out of trying drugs they were offered at the concert."*

*"I let Tonya, my 15-year-old, stay at home alone part of the weekend while I was away on business. I trusted her to only have her best friend over and to study for her test on Monday. She didn't let me down."*



**To build trust with teens, you need to know these things:**

- whether teens have broken important rules in the past (with family, friends, or at school)
- what teens' worries and concerns are
- what teens are generally doing each day
- how teens tend to behave

**Following are ways to find out this information:**

### ✓ **Listening**

Listen to teens when they freely share with you about themselves and their lives. If teens trust you enough to speak openly about their lives, you are in a good position to learn about and affect some of their most important decisions. In fact, research shows that parents trust their teens more when the teens are willing to share about their activities without being asked.

When teens share information on their own, this serves as the best means for accurate parental knowledge. It also is important to be a listening parent so that teens feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and experiences with you.

### ✓ **Asking**

Ask teens questions that encourage them to share. Asking teens about their day or how a certain activity went may open the door to their sharing information about the choices they are making in their lives. If you respond calmly and supportively when they share, they are more likely to continue sharing.

### ✗ **Snooping**

Avoid snooping, spying, or asking other people to report on teens. Although you may learn things about your teens, they are likely to respond with bitterness and anger when you share your knowledge of activities about them based on these methods. Teens also are much less likely to want to listen to your concerns, suggestions, or requests.



## **More Ways to Build Trust With Teens**

**Trust expectations should be reasonable.** Be aware of teens' limits to handle situations and do not place them in a "test of trust" situation that would challenge them to go beyond their limits.

**Teach trust by example.** Ask yourself, *What message am I sending to my teen? How does my teen talk about me with friends? Am I a positive example? What if my teen reported on my actions during a class presentation about family?*

**Avoid dishonesty.** Encourage honesty in your children even in situations when it is difficult to be honest. Make a point of rewarding teens for honest behavior. Follow through on your promises.

**Encourage communication.** Be home at times when teens are at home, but let them take the first step to talk with you most of the time. Just being in the house, even if your teens don't talk with you, helps them feel cared for and safe. Your being there lets them know you are available.

If teens take the step to talk with you, listen much more than you talk. If they ask for advice, help them consider their options. As much as possible, let them figure out what they should do.

Ask teens if you can talk with them if something is worrying you. If they agree, try to start the conversation with a comment such as, “I heard from a few parents that some kids at school have been experimenting with crack.” Don’t say, “I think you might be using crack,” unless you have solid evidence. Once you raise the issue, listen more than talk. Your purpose is to let teens know that you care about what they feel and think and that you respect them.

**Allow freedom with limits.** Encourage and support teens to be independent from you by slowly allowing more freedom. Teens still need limits on behavior and consequences when they break rules, but they also need to have privileges that increase with age and maturity.

Let teens understand that if you catch them drinking or learn about it from another parent, the school, or the police, they will lose certain privileges. Identify which privileges will be lost, such as spending time away from home with friends and using the family vehicle.

## Teen Pressure to Be Trusted

Sometimes teens will expect parents to trust them in situations that parents know their teens are not ready to handle. Let’s say your 14-year-old daughter asks you to let her go on an evening date with her 16-year-old boyfriend who has a car. If you say she can’t go on the date, she likely will accuse you of not trusting her. In all honesty, you don’t trust her in such a situation mainly because you know how hard it might be for her to manage her feelings and behaviors when she is alone in the car with her boyfriend.

It is important to set this limit while still saying that you believe she is a good person. You can explain to her that you can’t expect her to be in control of a situation that is not easy to manage. She might think she is doing fine until the situation gets out of hand. You also can say that as she gets older and gains more experience she will learn how to handle such a situation.

You are letting her know that you trust her to handle things she is capable of handling and that you would never want to put her in a situation that she is not ready to manage. If you allow teens to be in situations for which they are not ready, trust is likely to be broken.



## When Trust Is Broken

In general, trust is broken when parents or teens learn something about the other that does not fit with what they expected. For example, if a mother expects her son to return home at the designated curfew and he does not, then he has broken the trust of his mother. Likewise, if a father tells his daughter she can go to a movie with her friends as long as she does her homework, but then the father fails to keep this promise, the father has broken his daughter’s trust.

Breaks in trust often are upsetting because parents do not want to see their teens get hurt, and teens want to please their parents while gaining more independence. Serious breaks in trust make us think that the other person does not care about our feelings. Parents and teens may feel very angry, hurt, or even foolish when such a situation occurs.

Following are examples of situations where parent-teen trust is broken.





## Teen Lying

Teens usually lie because they are trying to establish themselves as separate people from their parents. Some of this lying is done to prevent parents from knowing everything or to help the teens do things parents may not like. Parents often feel hurt or angry because they think their child is pulling away from or even defying them.

Lying to parents can be quite normal for teens when the goal is to establish healthy independence. Parents can respond by expressing disappointment in the lying while also letting the teens know that they respect their ability to make choices. Lying can open a discussion about which situations, such as choice of friends, clothing, or spending of allowance money, are okay for the teen to decide independently.

## Parents' Violation of Teens' Privacy

Snooping as a means of finding out information about teens may do more harm than good, because it could make the lack of trust between you and them worse. If teens know you have been snooping, they may not trust you enough to turn to you for help if they're in trouble.

Snooping also sets up a bad habit for learning about teens' lives. When it comes to areas that threaten their well-being, set limits with consequences you can enforce. For example, if you are worried that your 16-year-old son may be drinking alcohol, you can establish a rule that it is not okay to drink since the legal drinking age is 21.



## Regaining Trust

Helping a teen earn back trust that has been lost can be difficult. You might be afraid that your teen is likely to do something that breaks your trust again. Here are some steps you can take:

- Discuss each of your views regarding the trust that has been broken. Try to understand each other's thoughts and feelings, and clear up any misunderstandings.
- After discussing how trust has been broken, spend time thinking together about how the relationship will be better if trust is restored.
- Finally, decide on specific steps for regaining trust and a time for talking again in the future to see whether progress is being made. For example, have your son check in when he arrives at a destination and give the number of an adult who can be contacted for verification. He also can have friends over to the house after school when a parent or responsible adult can be present.

Following are examples of real situations of broken and regained trust:

### “Homework Horrors”

Jasmine was a good student and usually completed her work on time. She had earned the trust of her parents to do her homework in her bedroom rather than at the kitchen table.

One week Jasmine did not finish some of her homework. Her teacher sent home a note to her parents telling them that several of her homework assignments had not been completed. Jasmine was expected to get the note signed by her parents.

Jasmine did not want to disappoint her parents or lose her privilege of doing her homework in her room, so she



forged her parents' signatures on the note and gave it back to her teacher the next day.

Jasmine's teacher happened to mention the homework incident to one of Jasmine's parents during a parent-teacher meeting and was surprised to learn they knew nothing about it. Jasmine's parents were surprised too.

Jasmine's parents talked with Jasmine about the problem, letting her know that failing to do her homework was a problem, but covering up the problem was the bigger concern. She had broken their trust in her.

Jasmine was expected to do her homework at the kitchen table again. She understood that she would need to regain her parents' trust so that she could earn back the privilege of doing her homework in her room.

Because they talked openly and Jasmine had clear consequences for her behavior, she and her parents were on their way to rebuilding the trust in their relationship.

### **“The Credit Card Caper”**

John enjoyed his privilege of driving his mom's car on the weekends. One weekend afternoon, he wanted to use the car to go to a football game with some friends across town. He noticed the car was low on gas and decided to take Mom's credit card without telling her.

When Mom received her credit card bill and saw a charge she did not remember making, she asked John about it. He admitted what he had done. Mom explained that she would not have minded him using the card to buy gas if he had asked. But she did mind that he had taken her credit card without permission.

As a consequence, John had to pay back Mom for the gas, and he was not permitted to use the car for the next two weekends. Mom told him she was glad he told the truth about using the card and that this helped her to believe she could learn to trust him again in the future.

## **Handling Serious Problem Behaviors**

If your teen is engaging in serious problem behaviors (drug abuse, promiscuous sexual activity, stealing, repeated physical fighting, or other types of violence), do not try to handle this on your own. In these instances, given that the breaking of parent-teen trust is only part of the problem, professional help is needed.

Asking for help is a way to make your children feel safe and for them to know that they can trust you to take care of them. You can find professional help in your area by contacting your school counselor or your local Alabama Extension office ([www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu)).

## **Additional Resources in the Communicating With Your Teen Series**

“Communicating With Your Teen,” Extension publication HE-0780, [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).

“Negotiation,” Extension publication HE-0781, [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).

“Spending Time Together,” Extension publication HE-0782, [www.aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).

“Talking About Sex,” Extension publication HE-0783, [aces.edu](http://www.aces.edu).



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