

Rebuilding Lost Trust With Teen

by Jim Slemp

Has your teenage son just lied to you...again? When you said, "I love you" last night to your middle-school-age daughter, was the response a flippant, "That's nice"? Do behavior patterns you have harped on for ages seem more entrenched than ever? If "yes" is your answer to these questions, then you are probably feeling more than disappointed.

Remember, more than anything else, your middle-school-age student craves your total trust. You might as well trust your child; you don't have any other reasonable choice. Distrust simply breeds more distrust, but if you keep trusting your child, sooner or later the message will get through.

If the thought of extending more trust scares you, then somewhere along the way, the natural trust that exists between parent and child has been damaged or lost. Here are some examples of how trust is lost:

1. A single mistake. Have you ever said to your child, "If I can't trust you in this area, how can I trust you in other areas?" In truth, trust is not a one-time gift. It must be given again from time to time. Refusing to reinvest your trust totally blocks your child from rebuilding it. When a serious breach of trust has occurred, quickly establish a path back to restoration.

2. Judging guilty without a fair trial. Knowing your child as well as you do often predisposes parents to assume the worst in a situation before all the facts are known. Do you honestly see your child as innocent until proven guilty?

3. Lack of freedom. Certainly, trust must be earned. But, children cannot prove they are trustworthy until some real freedom is given to make decisions.

4. Reciting failures. In the heat of a confrontation, recalling your child's past failures is self-defeating. It only proves the forgiveness you said and believed you had extended wasn't real at all.

5. Parental evasion of the problem. Whether it is lying, sneaking, or any of many other problem behaviors, focus squarely on the conduct itself instead of immediately moving to the larger issue of trust. Instead of saying, "How can I trust you when you're continually lying to me?", try saying, "Look, we want to build a relationship, not tear it down. It would help tremendously if I could count on you being honest with me. How about for the next 24 hours, I'll try not to attack you and you try to stick to the truth?"

It might be nice if you could get your child to promise in writing not to betray your trust, but it would only be a piece of paper. As in any love relationship, you have to risk being hurt. That's the price of saying, "I still love you."

"But," you say, "What if my child lies again and if drugs or other dangerous abuses are involved? Am I to put my head in the sand and blindly trust?" The answer is, "no." The help of a professional counselor or psychiatrist may be required in this kind of situation. But, as long as you have some open communication, rebuilding trust should not be an impossible task.

Remember that the root of genuine trust is the basic attitudes that parent and child bring to the relationship. If you feel insecure in your own self-love and respect, you will find it very difficult to love and trust your child unconditionally. Your needs will need some attention first.

But, when you bring genuine love and attitudes of real respect to the relationship with your child, it becomes very difficult to spurn this base for an extended period of time. With some work, trust can flourish between you and your child.

WHEN YOUR CHILD NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP

What is the best way to approach teens about getting professional help? Showing your concern for their unhappiness and suggesting a discussion with someone outside the family might help. It is important to involve the child in your search for a therapist.

What if you think your child needs counseling and refuses to go? Suggest that the whole family has a problem and needs counseling. In fact, family counseling can help everyone else in the home better manage living with a disturbed youngster.

How do you find the right therapist for your child? Choose a professional with training in psychotherapy and experience in working with youth. Get recommendations from school, trusted physicians, friends, social agencies, or mental health clinics. Essential: The therapist's training and credentials should check out, the teenager should feel comfortable talking with him or her, and the therapist should be willing to talk with you without violating the therapist/patient relationship. Interview several candidates with your child, and allow the child two consultations before making a long-term commitment.

If the relationship between child and therapist is privileged, what rights do parents have? The relationship must be respected as confidential if the child is to share freely with the therapist. The parents have every right to a general discussion of the problem and help in becoming part of the solution.

What if you think the therapy is not helping or is progressing in a way that disturbs you? You can ask for psychological testing if you think the problem is more serious than the therapist realizes. You can also request consultation with another therapist. If your child's therapist refuses either request, you have grounds for changing therapists.

Jim Slemp was principal of Roosevelt Middle School in Eugene, Oregon at the time this article was written.