

“Building Trust Between You and Your Kids”

by Jim Burns, Ph.D.

“You promised that you would come to my game! Where were you?”

“You said you would pick me up at 9:30 – and it’s 10:30! Why do I always have to be the last one to get picked up? You’re always late!”

“How could you tell your friends about what happened to me? You said you wouldn’t tell anyone!”

“What do you mean I can’t get my driver’s license? You said I could get it if I passed my biology class and I passed it!”

Do any of these comments sound familiar? Too often, parents have not kept their word with their kids. Parents may not intentionally try to hurt their kids, but when moms and dads don’t keep their word, they cause damage to relationships and trust – sometimes creating lifelong negative consequences in kids’ lives. Someone has said, “Things are never quite the same somehow after you have to lie to a person.” While I don’t agree with the “have to lie” part of the quote, I do agree that a lack of honesty damages trust in relationships.

When addressing the topic of trust as a parenting issue, most often we focus on how parents can help their kids become trustworthy. In this tip sheet, however, I want to focus on how you can build the level of trust your kids have in you. Trust is a two-way street. Many times teenagers have told me their reasons for feeling they can’t share important information with their parents. Usually, it’s because they say they can’t trust their parents.

Parents, you want your kids to be able to trust you! It’s not easy being a kid these days. In fact, sometimes it can be downright scary to them! Being able to trust you can make all of the difference as your child moves through adolescence. You’ll want your kids to be able to share important information with you so that you can still coach, mentor and guide them successfully into adulthood. Obviously, adolescents won’t tell you every detail of their lives as they get older. But, don’t cut off the opportunity to influence your kids because they don’t feel they can trust you with their private information.

Here are some ideas on building trust between you and your kids.

Trust is built through honesty. In my experience, most kids identify the source of their lack of trust in parents as the result of seeing firsthand that their parents are less than honest with them. Jesus commands his followers, “Simply let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” (Matthew 5:37.) Let’s face facts: no parent is perfect. Still, as parents we are called to live our lives with integrity. Because we serve as our children’s role models for life and faith, we need to be very careful in how we live our lives before our kids. Your kids don’t need your perfection, they need your honesty...and especially when you fail to

follow through on something you said you would do. How can you increase your “honesty” quotient and, as a result, your trust level with your kids?

- 1. Think before you promise.** Ask yourself, “If I make this promise, can I keep my word?”
- 2. If you can’t keep your word, don’t promise.** It’s much better to say, “I’m going to try my hardest to get to your game tomorrow, but I can’t promise you I’ll make it” and not make it, than to say, “I’ll be there for sure!” and not show up.
- 3. Think before you act.** When it occurs to you that you can’t keep your word, be sure to evaluate what message it will send your son or daughter – and how you can minimize the resulting damage if you truly can’t keep your verbal commitment.
- 4. Ask for your child’s forgiveness when you fail to keep your word.** Don’t sweep your failures under the carpet. Face them head on. Apologize and ask for forgiveness.

Trust is grown through respect. When you demonstrate respect for your children, they will learn that even if you see an issue differently, or if you set an expectation for them with which they disagree, they will still have been heard. Respect has much to do with the freedom to communicate with each other; to be listened to, and even disagree, without breaking or damaging a relationship. So, use good communication skills with your kids. Be a good listener. Do your best to see things from their point of view, even if you disagree. If you do these things, your kids will sense that you respect them – and that you can be trusted to weigh information fairly.

Take confidentiality seriously. When your child confides in you, take it seriously. This doesn’t mean that you can never share information with anyone else. Sometimes, sharing important information may be exactly the right thing to do. Still, treat private information with respect. If you know that the information your son or daughter shares with you needs to be conveyed to someone else, you should tell your child what you intend to do with the information and why. (An example is if your child shares information about a friend who is suicidal.) Remember, demonstrating this kind of respect grows trust. When it comes to most of the private information your children will share with you, as a general rule, keep it to yourself. Don’t share their secrets with others.