

Cultivating Trusting Relationships

When my 13-year-old daughter's best friend's mother was coming to me with more information about what my daughter was going through and struggling with at school than my own daughter was ever telling me, I was beside myself. How were intimate specifics between my daughter and her best friend and their experiences at school such common knowledge to her bestie's mom, yet my daughter would barely share a detail of her day's events with me? Was I not safe to confide in? How could my daughter struggle with things in silence at home, when I was right there at her disposal? Why wouldn't she just tell me what was going on and let me help? And, even more irksome (to me at the time), what did her bestie's mom do differently that made her so trusted and approachable to her daughter?

How an adult becomes "ask-able," or the kind of adult with whom children and teens are comfortable approaching and confiding, is a secret of the ages most parents and those in a parenting role would like to know. Parents and educators need to be able to help children with smaller, everyday issues like friendship problems and the big upsets that accompany them. These little confidences between adult and child/teen lay the foundation for larger issues like peer pressure, navigating failing grades, or dealing with bullying. Ultimately, it comes down to trust. Does the child/teen trust you enough to sensitively and carefully listen first and then respond to their story with empathy for all involved? Will you withhold judgement and realize your child's feelings are real? Will you help them strengthen their friendships? Will you think through the potential consequences and ensure that further harm does not result if you intervene?

Parents can intentionally respond to their children/teens in ways that promote trusting, caring relationships – ones in which adults learn to become the “ask-able” or approachable adult. And, your child/teen benefits from learning relationship skills you’ve modeled that involve the ability to listen for understanding, assert needs, communicate effectively, seek help when needed, and negotiate conflict constructively. When we are intentional about modeling these skills for our children/teens, we enjoy multiple benefits – increasing skills alongside our child/teen and deepening our trusting relationship with each other.

The following are simple, practical ways to become intentional about cultivating a trusting relationship so that you become an “ask-able” adult.

Create a daily listening ritual. Children/teens of all ages have big and small questions about the world and are working daily to figure out their emotions, friendships, and other mysteries of the universe. Set aside time in your day when you really listen to your child/teen. Put your phone away! Find out what is going on in their mind. Be sure when you are listening to keep an open mind and reserve judgement. If they fear your critique, they will be less likely to speak up.

Practice asserting needs and asking for help. As advocates for young people, we often speak up for them when they are not sufficiently articulating their needs. However, this may unintentionally take away valuable practice. We need to encourage communication rehearsals and offer small chances for children to practice speaking up. Encourage your child to order for themselves at a restaurant. Offer example language that your unsure teen can use to assert their needs with a friend. When running errands with your child, point out who they could go to for help if they ever get lost or need assistance in a store. Talk through safety plans with your teen – what to do if their car breaks down while they are out with friends.

Focus on using and learning about logical consequences not punishments. Most parents admit that knowing what to do about discipline issues is a challenge. It is worth pointing out that punitive strategies only work to create distrust between children and adults. When children/teens act out, they need help calming down and dealing with their big feelings. Then they can reflect on the harm caused or damage done and how they might repair it. Different situations require different solutions. Hurt feelings or damaged property will require a child to learn an authentic consequence and how to take steps to fix what they’ve broken.

If we want our children/teens to discover how to navigate trusting relationships, which are the cornerstone of their sense of wellbeing, then we need to invest in continually building a sense of trust and safety. Opportunities naturally arise every day where children/teens can become thoughtful and active participants in growing healthy relationships. As parents, we can model the interactions and trust we want to build with our children/teens.

Find more at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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