Cultivating Trusting Relationships

"It's sad our girls aren't talking. How are they going to work anything out that way?" said Tara, the mother of Janie's teenage daughter's best and oldest friend. "I didn't know they were fighting," replied Janie as she walked away wondering why she hadn't heard first hand about her daughter's friendship woes. When she returned home, Janie asked her daughter about it. "Oh, it's nothing," was her daughter's response. She recalled just last evening noticing the light on under her door late into the evening and could see her daughter's tired, worn expression. "I can see you're upset. And Mrs. Anderson mentioned that you and Cara aren't talking. Won't you tell me what's going on?"

As Janie wondered why her daughter chose to struggle in silence, she thought about their conversations about Cara over the past months. Janie didn't approve of how Cara pressured her daughter to take risks she might not otherwise take and had made that well-known to her daughter. Had her comments about Cara created a barrier between her and her daughter? Was she now not safe to confide in? Her frustration mounted as she tried to figure out what she might do or say to get her daughter talking again.

How does an adult become "ask-able" - the kind of adult with whom children and teens are comfortable coming to and confiding in? Parents and educators need to be able to help with smaller, everyday issues like when children and teens face simple friendship problems and the big upsets that accompany them. These little confidences between adult and child or teen prepare them for larger issues like dealing with peer pressure, navigating failing grades, or dealing with a bullying peer. The question raised is critically important since, according to a recent review of five years of bullying trends by Limber and colleagues, the majority of U.S. youth say they would not tell a parent or teacher if they were being bullied. Why? Some may fear adults blaming them for the incident. But others may fear that adults will take action toward the bully, punishing the action and leaving the accusing child vulnerable to further attacks.

So what's a caring teacher, parent, after school program staff person, or other who works with children or teens to do? Ultimately, it comes down to trust. Does the child or teen trust you enough to sensitively, carefully listen, and respond to their

story with empathy for all involved? Will you help them strengthen their friendships? Will you think through the potential consequences and ensure that further harm does not result from your intervention?

In fact, the site that launched in January of this year entitled ParentingMontana.org, a model for parents around the country, teaches precisely those specific ways of responding that can promote trusting, caring relationships, ones in which adults learn how to become the "ask-able" or approachable adult.

Fundamental to getting along in school, in the workplace, and at home are relationship skills - one of the five core competencies named in research as vital to children's success. Current research is also finding that not only are these social and emotional skills essential for children and teens, they are also essential to hone in teachers, parents, and all those who work with children to ensure their success. Relationship skills involve the ability to listen for understanding, to assert needs, communicate effectively, seek help when needed, and negotiate conflict constructively. These skills are best learned through interactive modeling or enacting the skill and reflecting on what the child noticed while it was being performed. And, the good news is that when we become intentional about modeling these skills, we enjoy multiple benefits. Our skills increase alongside our increasing child's skills while deepening our trusting relationship.

The following are simple, practical ideas for becoming intentional about cultivating trusting relationships so that you become an "ask-able" adult. Each practice will be followed by questions so that you can reflect on how small changes might improve how you relate to the children you care about.

Create a daily listening ritual.

Children and teens of all ages have big and small questions about the world. Daily, they are hard at work trying to figure out their emotions, friendships, and other mysteries of the universe! Create a time in your day when you really listen to your child (or teen). Put your phone away. Find out what's really going on in their mind. If you are a teacher or program staff person, gather in a circle daily and offer each child/teen the chance to share. Reflect on a key question like "how do you most like to spend your free time?" or "what does being a good friend mean to you?" It doesn't have to require a lot of your time. For parents, bedtime can become a magical opportunity for connection when you can reflect on the worries, cares, and happy thoughts of the day. Be sure that when you are listening, you keep an open mind and reserve judgment. If they fear your critique, they'll be less likely to speak up.

Key Reflections: How frequently do you put your phone away, ensure distractions are minimized, and fully focus on listening to the child or teen in front of you? How could you manage to build time into your day to make this caring connection?

Added Bonus: This strategy is used frequently by parents and teachers to achieve several additional goals. It can significantly improve behavior if a child is tempted to engage in attention-seeking misbehaviors. Your daily ritual can take care of the child's need for your focused attention. This simple strategy can also ensure safety so that adults can become aware of upset feelings and problems through these discussions and address them before they escalate into a crisis.

Practice asserting needs and asking for help.

As advocates for young people, we may frequently speak up for them when they are not well articulating their needs. This may unintentionally take away valuable practice. So how can we encourage their assertive communication rehearsals? Look for and offer plenty of small chances for children to speak up. Encourage your child or teen to order dinner themselves at a restaurant. Offer helpful sample language to a teen who is unsure how to assert her needs to a friend. Teachers can conduct occasional student-teacher one-on-ones where they check in on how they are feeling about their work, share strengths, and ask about areas of concern. Provide plenty of wait time and if your child or teen stumbles or is thinking silently, allow them time to figure it out. While running errands with your child, point out who might be best to seek help from if they got lost or needed help while in the store. You might ask,"can you identify a store clerk?" or "can you find a caring Mom?" Or talk through safety plans with your teen. "What if your car breaks down while out with friends?" In any circumstance in which a child or teen is in trouble, any caring Mom may just be the most likely candidate to step up and help.

Key Reflections: Is your child or teen able to tell you or a teacher when they have a need whether it's a headache or they've been emotionally hurt? How can you look for small chances in your every day time with children to help them practice asserting their needs or asking for help?

Focus on learning about and using logical consequences not punishments.

Most parents admit that knowing what to do about discipline issues is challenging. And teachers and other providers share that challenge. But it's a problem worth tackling if punitive strategies only work to create distrust among and between children and adults. How could a teacher respond to friends who are arguing and clearly upset? Listening with an open mind might be a start.

Key Reflections: How can we help deal with children's or teen's feelings first helping them calm down? How can we plan ahead for dealing with our own big feelings of anger or frustration when children or teens act out so that we calm down instead of raising our volume? Then, how can we help children reflect on and repair the harm they've caused whether it involves hurt feelings or damaged property? Because every situation is different, the solutions will be different too. If detention or suspension is the same consequence for every mis-step, how will children or teens learn authentic consequences and how to take steps to fix what they've broken?

Perhaps in the case of the two friends giving each other the silent treatment after an argument, after calming down and listening for understanding, a teacher might ask the individuals involved what their role in the problem was, what harm they caused, and how they could repair the emotional damage? This involves our children or teens in thinking through the situation, taking responsibility, and finding their own way to make amends. These lessons promote continued trust between adults and students if we only take the time and care to follow through. And, these steps can be taken in family life too.

If we want our children and teens to discover how to navigate relationships - the cornerstone of their sense of wellbeing - then we need to invest in our continued focus on building trust and safety. We need to find opportunities that naturally arise in everyday life for our children and teens to become thoughtful and active participants in growing healthy relationships.

About The Author:

Jennifer Miller, M.Ed., author of the popular site, Confident Parents, Confident Kids, has twenty years of experience helping adults become more effective with the children they love through social and emotional learning. Among other roles, she serves as lead writer for ParentingMontana.org, a project that provides easy to use parenting tools to support a child's success from kindergarten through the teen years.

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