

Your Kids Don't Trust You

By Dr Justin Coulson

The most important line in this article is this one:

Trust is the belief that the other person has your best interests at heart.

In parenting, nothing matters more than that your child trusts you. Your child must believe that you want the very best for them. No matter what. But... most of our children don't believe that.

Picture this: you walk into your child's bedroom and find them doing something that they're not supposed to be doing. A younger child might be drawing on the wall. Or tearing pages out of your favourite book. Or masturbating. An older child might be on their device and looking at inappropriate content online. Or talking to a friend and using coarse language. (Or, heaven forbid that you walk in on this... masturbating.)

What's the typical response? We react. Large. Now they're in trouble. We're removing privileges or delivering a lecture. Perhaps we are asking them what in the world they are thinking, or imposing sanctions.

At no point as we stand in the doorway angrily scowling or threatening do our children ever look at us and say, "Gee Mum/Dad, I guess you're right. And I can see that you're telling me to clean up the mess because that's what is best for me". Or "Wow, taking my device away makes sense. It's certainly in my best interests."

Regardless of whether what we have said to our children is accurate, they're rarely, if ever hearing it as something that will make them trust us more. Instead, it's driving a wedge between us and harming trust.

Kids don't learn to trust us when things go right. They learn it when things go wrong. The moment you most want to explode is the exact moment your child is deciding whether you're safe.

So what do I recommend instead? Here's what I do.

First: name it. I let my child know I'm not happy with what's going on, and that we'll need to have a chat about it soon. Then I walk away and let things cool. (This matters. Nothing good gets said while everyone's temperature is up - mine included. High emotions equals low intelligence.)

When we do sit down, my opening question surprises them every time: "What does trust mean?"

My kids know the answer by heart now. "Trust means believing that the other person is going to act in your best interest."

Then I ask the question that sets the stage for whether we proceed or not: "Do you trust me? Do you believe that I'm going to act in your best interest?"

Only once they've said yes can the real conversation begin. Because now we're on the same side of the table. If they say no, that becomes a different conversation about why.

Some time ago I had an extremely difficult and serious conversation with one of my children. She'd done something that crossed our lines of acceptability by a long way. I followed the steps above - and then,

because the stakes were so high, I added one more. I asked her, "Do you know that there is no one on this planet of 8 billion people who loves you as much as your Mum and I do? No one who wants what's best for you more than we do?"

I told her she could trust me. And that we'd work through this thing together. That's when the walls came down.

Our children trust us when we step away from "sanctions" and "consequences", and focus on problem-solving. That's the very best "discipline". No child has ever been lectured into feeling loved. Your child's behaviour is a moment. Your child's trust is the relationship. Don't trade the relationship to win the moment.

Studies show that trust increases efficiency. We can get more done and much faster when trust is high. We can make a deal with a handshake. Without trust, we second-guess, draw up legal contracts, demand oversight and accountability. Supervision and monitoring becomes a requirement. A lack of trust is costly.

Where trust is high, people communicate more openly, accept feedback more readily, and cooperate with decisions even when they disagree. That last part is powerful for parents. A child who trusts you will accept a limit they don't like.

In the midst of my challenging conversation with my daughter, we agreed that YouTube was off-limits. Without trust in the relationship, this decision would have felt like a punishment - something she would need to work around when no one was watching. But because she understood the challenge we faced, knew I was acting in her best interest, and was part of the problem-solving process, *she was the one who suggested it!* When kids own the solution, they keep it.

But the [landmark finding](#) from parenting research is that parental "monitoring" doesn't actually keep kids safe; child *disclosure* does. And kids disclose to parents they trust and feel warmth from. Surveillance and sanctions reduce disclosure; trust increases it.

"Do you trust me?"

Our children will believe we have their best interests at heart when our response to their worst moments proves it.



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