



I Don't Trust You Anymore!

by Linda K Sibley

When I first began my career in Children's Ministry, I would tell prospective Sunday School teachers something like this: "I don't want you to worry about whether or not the children will like and trust you. They will naturally trust you and want a relationship with you, unless you do something to violate their trust." Today, however, I give prospective children's workers very different message: "Because so many of our kids today have been wounded by the adults in their lives, kids no longer naturally trust adults. Therefore, you must build trust with the kids in your class before you can effectively teach them. And some of your kids may be so hurt, that it will take a long time to gain their trust."

Trust is the key to a child's attitude toward self and the world. Trust is the antecedent of all learning, of responsibility, and of self-discipline.*

Trust does not just happen. It is a bond that is established when children know beyond a doubt that the adults in their lives will always love and value them, will never leave them, will support them even when they make mistakes, and will protect them from harm. When children are hurt by those with whom they have enjoyed a close bond, their ability to trust will be weakened. If they live with a constant stream of broken connections, broken promises, rejection and criticism, they will come to believe that no one cares for them, least of all adults. Unfortunately, in our society today, countless thousands of our children have concluded that it hurts to trust adults, and have simply stopped doing so.

If you are a Confident Kids facilitator, teacher, parent -- or anyone else who works with children, you are no doubt concerned about your children's ability to trust. Here are a few thoughts that can help.

- 1. First of all, pay attention.** At the end of this article, you will find a list of characteristics concerning children and trust. By observing your children over the next few weeks, you can gain a clearer idea of whether or not they are actually dealing with trust issues. ***NOTE: If you have a child who exhibits symptoms of severe trust issues, especially if she or he has a history of abandonment and/or trauma, seek professional help immediately!***
- 2. Communicate your caring and commitment.** Although *you* know how deeply you care about your children, never take for granted that your children know it. Especially if there is some pain in their family right now, children may have unexpressed doubts and fears about the trustworthiness of adult relationships. Use words and actions directly aimed at reassuring your kids that you really do love them and are committed to them.



3. Establish clear rules and appropriate boundaries. Children learn to trust when they feel safe and protected and deep down inside, they know that rules and boundaries are a means of protection. In fact, as much as their behavior may try to tell you differently, they feel much more secure - and trusting - when the adults in their lives set the parameters for their behavior. As simple as this sounds, this may well be one of the most difficult parts of dealing with children today. However, ***I can guarantee you that without clear rules and boundaries, children will never learn to trust,*** in any situation in which they find themselves.

4. Parents, be honest about what is happening in your family. Sometimes, parents mistakenly think they can protect their children by not talking about the painful realities of their family life. However, as John Bradshaw once said, children know when things are not right at home, they just don't always know what they know. Left on their own, children's imaginations fill in the details, leaving them feeling that what is happening is their fault, and that life is crazy. By trusting your kids with accurate information, you calm those fears and assure them of your continued love and care.

5. Help your children find mentors. Teaching your children to trust does not fall on you alone! Encourage your children to participate in activities where they can develop relationships with other trustworthy adults, such as Sunday School teachers, coaches, and caring relatives. Such mentors will help your children develop the ability to trust in relationships.



Here's what to look for to determine if your child is struggling with trust issues:*

1. When children trust, they:

- Tell the truth
- accept compliments and affection
- express appreciation, enthusiasm, and joy
- display a positive attitude toward others - at least some of the time
- feel optimistic that they can succeed in school
- display empathy and sensitivity
- express their opinions
- handle themselves without losing control
- work through anger in appropriate ways
- enjoy their own company



2. When children struggle with trust, they:

- are occasionally spacey
- occasionally tell lies, steal, destroy property
- are moody, angry, and depressed
- act out and seek attention
- may have poor peer relationships
- keep adults at a distance
- are immature and manipulative
- have a poor self-concept
- learn only when they like the teacher

3. Children with severe trust issues:

(NOTE: children who exhibit any of these symptoms should receive professional help)

- lost touch with reality
- lie habitually
- kleptomaniac
- suicidal
- profoundly depressed
- isolated most of the time
- dangerous to self or others
- does not know the difference between right and wrong
- seeks rejection as a way of life
- few or no deep relationships
- consistent problems with authority

*Taken from *Trust Building with Children Who Hurt*, by Ruth P. Arent, The Center for Applied Research in Education.