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Parenting to Build Character in Your Teen



Teach the 6 Pillars
of Character!

trustworthiness
respect
responsibility



fairness
caring
citizenship



A joint project of
*CHARACTER COUNTS!*SM Josephson Institute of Ethics
& *COMMON SENSE PARENTING*[®] Boys Town

BOYS TOWNSM
Press

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CHAPTER 7

Trustworthiness

*The highest compact we can make with our fellow is –
“Let there be truth between us two forevermore.”*

– RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Talk to a teenager about trust and you may get a deeply emotional response. Trust is a big deal for teenagers. Teen relationships are especially vulnerable to real and perceived betrayals of trust. Whether it’s a friendship gone sour, a broken promise from a parent, or a failed romantic relationship, trust that’s unraveled somehow never gets completely knit back together.

Trustworthiness is essential to meaningful and durable relationships. Everyone wants to be able to trust the people closest to them. Life is better and easier when it is full of mutual trust.

In fact, there are two sides to trust. One is *to trust*, to have faith and confidence in the intentions and actions of others, to believe that they will do the right thing. The

other is *to be trustworthy*, to demonstrate by words and acts that people can trust us. The first – whether we trust another – is a choice. The second – to be trustworthy – is an ethical obligation. Thus, people of character are worthy of trust.

The kinds of behavior that produce trust – integrity, honesty, reliability, promise-keeping, and loyalty – are called virtues, and every parent should try to instill these virtues in his or her children. This chapter is about helping your teen develop these virtues by teaching, enforcing, advocating and modeling them.

Teaching Trustworthiness

First, make a special effort to teach your teen to desire and value trust and the advantages that flow from being trusted. For example, a teen who earns a parent's trust will be given the benefit of the doubt in tough situations where what the teen tells the parent is contradicted by others or just seems implausible. Teens must understand that mutual trust is essential to meaningful intimate relationships, that untrustworthy behavior destroys relationships and that trust is an extremely valuable asset in the workforce. Finally, stress that it feels good to be trusted and awful to be distrusted.

Second, parents must teach teens what specific attitudes and behaviors produce and undermine trust. Trustworthiness is an unusually complicated idea that involves four major qualities: **integrity, honesty, reliability, and loyalty.**

Integrity

Integrity means moral wholeness as demonstrated by a consistency of thoughts, words, and deeds. (Often, this is described as “walking the walk.”) But it is more than consistency. Integrity is frequently used as a synonym for good character because it involves strict adherence to a moral code.

Most young people value integrity quite highly but they don’t always have a clear or accurate picture of what real integrity looks like. For some, integrity is simply “doing your own thing” or not being intimidated or influenced to do anything except follow their own impulses. Thus, some teens admire people they see as rebels even when those people are simply selfish or unwilling to control their passions.

It’s not easy to teach integrity in a world that too often seems to confirm the cynic’s credo, “Every man has his price.” Youngsters see politicians, athletes, executives, and other adults abandon principles of right and decent behavior in order to keep their jobs or make more money. The task of parents is to put this dark side of reality into perspective and to give their teens a brighter vision of humanity and themselves. Teach them with words and examples that most people, most of the time, live good and decent lives despite constant temptations to do otherwise.

A primary task in teaching integrity is to shift the focus from the shortcomings of others to the demands and challenges of safeguarding one’s own integrity. It

isn't always clear where integrity comes from, but just about everyone has an inner sense of decency, a line he or she won't cross. The challenge for parents is to teach their children to draw that line at the borders of the Six Pillars of Character.

'I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an honest man.'

— GEORGE WASHINGTON

Teenagers should be receptive to discussions about integrity in part because most teens hate hypocrisy. They are often quite contemptuous of people who are insincere in efforts to flatter, appease, or curry favor with employers, teachers, or others who have authority.

When we were kids, we called it “kissing-up.” The behavior was always regarded

as shabby and fundamentally dishonest, and if you kissed up in the hope of gaining approval or advancement, you demeaned yourself. It is wise to teach your teen, however, that integrity does not preclude tact, respectful diplomacy, and sincere courtesy.

Prepare your teen for the fact that he or she will face many situations that require courage to resist temptations, to overcome pressures to abandon basic beliefs in order to please others, to get something they want a lot, or simply to stay out of trouble.

Moral courage is rooted in mental and emotional strength that allows us to live up to our highest values even in the face of criticism, possible embarrassment,

and other undesirable results. Sometimes it's easier to risk injury than it is to risk being unpopular or losing something we really want, like a relationship or a spot on a baseball team or a part in a play. Thus, a good working definition of character is the *willingness to do the right thing even when it costs more than you want to pay*.

Another important aspect of moral courage is accepting what seems like failure or defeat without losing heart. Help your teen realize that disappointment and failure are unavoidable, that they are not fatal, and that even the most successful people fail more often than they succeed. In fact, many successes are built on the lessons we learn through failure.

While integrity asks us to courageously live in accordance with our inner beliefs, it does not prevent us from reassessing those beliefs and desires as we grow older and reorder our priorities.

Sometimes, teenagers think changing their minds means “selling out” some cherished belief or goal. Part of your job as a parent is to teach them that there is nothing shameful about thoughtfully abandoning goals in the face of new facts or conditions. Sometimes, we simply outgrow a dream. Learning when to let that dream go is an important part of growing up.

Honesty

The honesty aspect of the Pillar of Trustworthiness involves both what we say (our words) and what we do (our conduct). Honest people always try to convey the truth.

There are three aspects to honest communication: truthfulness, sincerity, and candor.

Truthfulness

Honest people are truthful. They do not intentionally misrepresent facts, intentions, or opinions. (We call this lying.) Intent is crucial to the distinction between truthfulness and truth. Being wrong is not the same thing as being a liar. An untruth told as the result of an honest mistake is not an act of dishonesty.

In teaching your teenagers the importance of honesty, they are bound to bring up situations where you lie or even where you want them to lie; for example, telling a caller you are not home or expressing joy over a gift that you really don't want.

You can't escape the fact that as important as honesty is, it sometimes gives way to other Pillars of Character like caring and respect. Even though it puts us on a slippery slope, we have to be honest with our kids: Not all lies are unethical.

There are times when an ethical person can be dishonest as a matter of kindness or respect. These well-intentioned lies are often called "white lies." Parents tell their children such lies frequently, whether it is about Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, or whether Barney is real. Saying you love an ugly gift or lying to a friend to get her to a surprise party fall into the same category. Only a fanatic would insist that we abandon all well-intentioned fantasy, surprise, humor, and kindness in the name of truthfulness.

But parents ought to give their teens guidelines that make it clear that all forms of dishonesty can potentially damage credibility and that good intentions are not always enough to justify a lie. They should teach their children to look at the lie from the perspective of the person being lied to. If that person learns of the lie, will he or she trust the liar less in the future? Will the person feel manipulated and betrayed or thank the person for caring?

For example, when kids eventually learn they were deceived about Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, they don't feel betrayed; their essential trust in their parents is not shaken. Children know the difference between stories and serious matters where reality counts. In the same way, most people happily forgive us for the small jokes and surprise-party deceptions. They are not likely to trust us less on other matters.

But some well-intentioned lies deprive people of important information they need in order to see their world more clearly. Consider, for example, parents of an adopted teen who lie about the facts of his birth, or a single mother who tells her daughter that her father is dead when he actually abandoned the family.

In these situations, the risk of broken trust is great. Remember this yourself and help your teenager understand that when people who have trusted us discover they've been lied to, it causes them to re-examine the whole relationship in the shadow of the question: "*What else have you lied to me about?*"

Sincerity

Honesty requires more than literal truthfulness. It requires sincerity, a genuineness of purpose that precludes all acts intended to create beliefs or impressions that are untrue, misleading, or deceptive, including deliberate omissions, half-truths, tricky word interpretations, and out-of-context statements. Parents should teach that it is as wrong to deceive as it is to lie.

Candor

Teenagers often have a particular problem understanding and dealing with the most advanced aspect of honesty, the obligation to volunteer needed information. This does not mean we have to volunteer everything we know or think (telling someone, “*Your hair looks awful,*” or “*I hate that sweater*”). We don’t expect or want others to always give us their unsolicited opinions or foist upon us facts that could ruin positive feelings or assassinate other relationships.

But when we ask others to trust us, we assure them that they can rely on us to act on their behalf, to protect them. That is why trust relationships require us to be candid, sincere, and guileless. We are obliged to reveal things that those who trust us *ought* to know for their own good or *want* to know so that they can make informed decisions.

Reliability and Promise-Keeping

Teach your teenager that trustworthy people keep their word, honor their commitments, pay their debts, and return what they borrow.

Help them understand that commitments create ethical obligations and that they should always think in advance whether they are willing and likely to be able to keep a promise before they make it. Before they make a promise, they should think about what could happen that would make it difficult, undesirable, or impossible to keep their word.

Parents also must heed their own advice, especially in dealing with their children. It is very important when making a promise to be sure that your teenager understands what you are and are not promising.

People often hear what they want to hear, and it is human nature to interpret all ambiguous facts in a way that supports self-interest. So, if there is even a hint of misunderstanding, explicitly clarify what you understand your commitment to be.

It is common for teenagers to translate statements of possibility as promises.

"Will you get me a car if I get a B average?" your teenage son asks.

"We'll see, Billy. Just do your best," is your reply.

A month later, after getting a B average, Billy asks for the car saying, *"You promised."*

Of course, parents and other adults sometimes are deliberately ambiguous when they have no intention of doing what the teen wants. It is a dishonest ploy designed to buy some peace and quiet. Honesty requires that if we say that there is a chance of doing something, it is a sincere expression of willingness to do it under the conditions stated.

Cheating and Stealing

Cheating and stealing are two serious – but, sadly, all too common – violations of the Pillar of Trustworthiness.

A national survey conducted in 2000 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics showed that at least 70 percent of all high school students cheat at least once each year. About half admit to cheating repetitively.

Stealing likewise seems rampant. According to the survey, at least 40 percent of the males and 30 percent of the females admitted that they stole something from a store in the past 12 months. And about one in four high schoolers said they stole something from a parent or relative in the same period.

It's hard to believe that your kids would cheat or steal, but it is wise to accept the real possibility that culture puts great pressures on teens to sacrifice principles of honesty for personal gain and peer group approval.

Talk to your teens about the pressures they face. Let your son or daughter know that all people, including you, are in a constant struggle to live up to high standards of ethics and honor, and that the real measure of character is the ongoing commitment to self-improvement.

Loyalty

Loyalty – standing with and behind someone in need – is an important virtue. It is expressed in various forms of caring and respect. A good and loyal friend, for example, is physically and emotionally available to provide appreciation in times of triumph and support in times of trauma.

Loyalty is an important part of trusting relationships. Our loyalties are important signs of the kinds of persons we are. Teach your teen to choose carefully who and what they will be loyal to and then to take their loyalties seriously. Ignoring expectations of loyalty undermines trust and is interpreted as a betrayal.

Friends and relatives who demonstrate real pride and feel real satisfaction in the success of others prove themselves trustworthy. On the other hand, those who minimize accomplishments by indifference or belittlement, or who reveal even a tinge of jealousy, poison the soil where trust grows.

Another dimension of loyalty and caring is the willingness to give honest, constructive feedback. But timing is very important. Waiting to be asked is a good rule of thumb. Teach teens to remember that how they convey information often sends a louder message than the information itself.

Remember to reflect caring and respect in all your feedback. Parents and teenagers are often unnecessarily brutal and harsh in their criticisms of each other.

Familiarity does not justify tactless or unkind remarks. At the same time, a person who asks for an honest evaluation should be open to receiving it. It is discouraging when a person asks our opinion and then gets mad at us for giving it.

During moments of upheaval caused by tragedies and setbacks – a bad grade, being cut from a team, feeling rejected, a personal illness – there are opportunities to strengthen or weaken trust. Teach and show that loyalty is demonstrated by making time to be there, in person or by phone, by listening and actively trying to understand and empathize. Too often we feel we need to be able to say or do something that removes the pain when the most meaningful and eloquent testimony to our caring is just being there.

‘Character is what you are in the dark.’

– DWIGHT L. MOODY

But there are dangers in misunderstanding the obligations of loyalty or in elevating these obligations above others.

Parents of teenagers should always be aware that young people can easily allow feelings of loyalty to friends and classmates to override their best ethical judgment.

Sometimes, the concept of loyalty may seem to demand lies, deceptions, and even illegal activity. Teach your teenager to choose their loyalties carefully because they can exact a high price. We should help teenagers realize they need to find ways to help and support their friends without sacrificing their own integrity and repu-

tations. When loyalty demands dishonorable conduct, it demands too much.

Enforcing Trustworthiness

When a teen does anything that you consider to be untrustworthy, whether it is outright lying or cheating or more subtle forms of dishonesty, you should impose a consequence designed to send a clear message that this is not acceptable.

On the other hand, if your teenager demonstrates moral courage under pressure, be certain to praise the conduct.

Advocating Trustworthiness

Be certain your teenager knows that you want him or her to be a trustworthy person, that honesty is better than dishonesty, and that credibility and trust are great personal assets that can easily be destroyed.

Modeling Trustworthiness

H. Jackson Brown Jr. suggests that you should “Live so that when your children think of fairness and integrity, they think of you.” Remember, you teach values not merely by what you say, but what you do.

Be self-conscious about demonstrating honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, and loyalty in all you do. Don’t lie to save money or gain other advantages. Don’t lie or deceive in front of your teen or allow him

to do so in front of you. Don't cheat on taxes or betray trusts. Avoid even petty acts of dishonesty that set a bad example.

Character in Action

After 15-year-old Tara baby-sat the toddler twins next door last night, their mother phoned Tara's parents to offer a compliment.

"Tara is so awesome!" the mother said. "She called me yesterday morning to let me know she'd be here at 7:30 and she came right on time. She also noticed that Jared seemed fussy when she put him to bed, so she made sure to tell me about that. The boys had a great time with her. We sure were impressed!"

Tara's father took the call and mentioned it to Tara later that day.

"Tara, I'm really proud of the way you handled that baby-sitting job. You called ahead and then you made sure you told the Cliffords about Jared being fussy. Sounds like you earned their trust. You'll probably be baby-sitting a lot with their kids."

Every day we have opportunities to praise our kids. In that praise, there often is an opportunity to talk about one of the Pillars. In the story, the father praised his daughter for being trustworthy.

The story shows how easy it is to use *Effective Praise* to encourage your teenager's positive behaviors. The father used the three steps of *Effective Praise* in just a few sentences. He **showed approval** by telling his

daughter he was proud of her. He **described her positive behavior** by mentioning that she called ahead and told the parent about the fussy child. Then he **gave a reason** by letting her know she would probably get more work from the family because she was trustworthy.

The story also shows that you don't have to have long philosophical discussions about the Pillars to teach your kids how they fit into everyday life. In fact, taking an everyday situation, as this parent did, provides a valuable lesson in how important character is to what we do each day.

Thoughts About Trustworthiness

Here are some quotations that you can use to launch a discussion or make a point about trustworthiness:

- *Integrity is better than any career.*
– RALPH WALDO EMERSON
- *What is right is right even if no one is doing it.
What is wrong is wrong even if everyone is
doing it.* – UNKNOWN