

Trust Coach Vol. 3: Trust and parenting, building a deeper bond.

When it comes to trust, kids are a special case. They tend to trust us more than they should when they are young and less than they should as they mature. Unfortunately our kids tend to trust us least when they could use our guidance the most. As they mature they are making life changing decisions and at risk for making mistakes that could be life altering. Often it is during this period that they turn to their friends, who usually have little insight or experience, for advice. How much better would it be for them to feel comfortable turning to a parent? Who is going to have their best interests at heart more than the people who raised them?

Trust is the willingness to make ourselves vulnerable to another. When our kids are young we go out of our way to make sure that they don't trust others inappropriately, we try to limit how vulnerable they can become. This protection can often mean that the first trust violations they experience occur at home: failure to follow through on a promise, or a set of rules that seems to apply only to them and not the adults in their lives.

The intent of this volume of the Trust Coach newsletter is to raise awareness about trust and the role it plays in raising our kids. Parenting is an incredibly complex task and there isn't a manual that comes along with each newborn child. There's no silver bullet; the perfect approach and parent for one child may be a train wreck with another. We often don't talk about parenting, sharing best practices or problem solving with friends. My goal here is not to tell people what they are doing wrong or suggest they are bad parents. I am hoping to add something to people's tool boxes that has worked for me and others I've helped.

Command and control

Parents often use a command and control style with their kids: "Do as I say because I say so." In part this is a completely natural approach to take when our kids are very young. Young children often don't have the capacity to understand our reasons for our requests. Often people stay with this approach because it's what their parents used, and no one has ever suggested another approach that makes sense to them. Couple this with the fact that we are never more vulnerable than we are when it comes to our kids, and an overwhelming desire for control can be understood. Over the long term it can be dysfunctional and harmful, but it's understandable.

The problem with a command and control style of parenting is that it works... until it doesn't. It can become addictive to have your kids do what you tell them to. Unfortunately we don't often have a plan B in place when that stops working and we frequently fail to adjust to a different style in a timely manner. Many parents in this situation find themselves trapped in a series of escalations -- yelling louder because regular yelling didn't work. Kids can be a lot like water; the tighter your grip the less you have.

Kids need to be able to separate from their parents and establish their own identities. The more controlling the parent, the tougher the fight to establish a child's identity becomes and the bigger the

gulf that eventually ensues between parent and child. Controlling children in the short term may end up completely destroying the relationship. Even worse off are children that never manage to overcome the controlling nature of a parent. They are then incredibly vulnerable to being controlled by whoever shows up next in their lives. That next controlling person could be an abusive partner, terrible boss, or cult leader only too eager to tell them what to do and what to think.

What a real expert says

I've had the good fortune to work with Dr. Allison Rees over the past year. Allison runs LIFE Seminars which provides parenting courses, among other things, for families in the greater Victoria area. Allison has also co-authored books on parenting ("Sidestepping the Power Struggle" and "The Parent-Child Connection") and given talks in a wide array of locations. She is, in my opinion, an incredible parenting expert. We've had a number of fantastic conversations about parenting in general, and trust and parenting in particular. My interactions with Allison have really pushed my thinking about parenting and about trust.

Allison has shared several insights with me. Among them is the statement that we should be striving to raise a thoughtful child rather than an obedient child. An obedient child is positioned to be controlled by whoever comes along next. A thoughtful child is more likely to question things that don't seem right, think for themselves rather than caving in to peer pressure, and stay true to their own values rather than blindly adopting others. Another insight from Allison is that one of our goals with our kids should be to get fired as their general manager and hired back as a consultant. Essentially this means giving them more and more control over their own decisions, but trying to help them think through those decisions and providing them with the best advice we can. These insights both point to the concept of giving up control and adopting a more collaborative relationship with our kids.

Building trust with our kids

When my ex and I split up, I was informed by many experts and people who pretended to be experts that it would be very easy for my sons to become alienated from me. Apparently this happens a lot when families split up. I came to realize that the only thing I controlled with my sons was how I showed up for them in the limited time that we got to spend together. I have been extremely fortunate to develop a very close relationship with both of my boys.

Trust is a willingness to make yourself vulnerable to another. There are elements of uncertainty, vulnerability and choice involved. To build trust with your kids you need to reduce uncertainty as much as you can. I try to be profoundly predictable in my responses to my kids. There are a few ways that I manage this.

First, I have a relentlessly positive story about my sons Thomas and Alexander. We interpret the world through stories and by starting with a positive story for my sons I tend to give them the benefit of the doubt when things go wrong. I'm willing to listen when they are trying to explain why they have, or haven't, done something. I help them reframe events in their lives from a positive perspective. The world can be a tough place, I believe that I act as a safe harbour for my sons: a place from which they

can take risks in the world, knowing that there is always a haven where someone is on their side and believes in them.

Second, I try to be transparent with my sons and include them in my decision-making process. Research on procedural justice shows that having a voice in the process strongly influences our perceptions that things are fair. Including our kids in our decisions, giving them a voice, and explaining why we choose the things we choose gives them insight and makes it easier for them to predict our future decisions.

Third, remain calm. My mantra with my sons is that crap happens, but it's how we respond that matters. So when something gets dropped or broken I try to remember that it's just stuff. Nothing matters more to me than my sons. They are the most important thing in my life, and I make every effort to let them know that with words and deeds.

From the Trust model

The trust model I use incorporates a number of elements that can be influenced to build trust with others, including children. I will focus on two of those here: integrity and benevolence.

Integrity

I spoke about integrity in the first volume of the Trust Coach newsletter. Essentially it means following through on your promises and having your actions align with your words. As parents we can be bad on both fronts. "Do as I say (not as I do)," or making idle threats or promises, all serve to undermine our credibility with our kids. In many instances it seems that we hold our kids to a higher standard that we do ourselves. Telling them they need to eat well, exercise a lot and do their homework while we sit on the couch eating junk food doesn't play well.

Integrity tips

- If there are a set of rules in the house they should apply to everyone, with exceptions being granted only sparingly to those unable to follow them.
- Be careful of the promises you make or the consequences you propose. You need to be overwhelmingly consistent and predictable with your kids, which means actually delivering on promises and following through with consequences.
- Make sure you both have the same understanding of what promise is being made. I told my sons I would get a dog when I bought my own home. Somehow that became "We'll get a dog when dad moves." I moved into another rental that, unfortunately, doesn't allow dogs, so there is some disappointment.
- Think about the decisions you make and how they align with the values you express to your kids. Be prepared to tell the story that shows how those decisions are consistent with your expressed values.

Benevolence

Benevolence is acting in someone's best interests, doing what is best for them. This is an area where my thinking about trust and parenting has really been pushed when. When my son Thomas was 12 he said

“Dad, even when you’re upset with me I know it’s about what’s best for me.” My son Alexander recently said “Dad, you always seem to think about us and put us first.” If you are properly communicating your benevolence, that should be how your kids feel. Benevolence is also a theme I will touch on in a future edition of the Trust Coach newsletter.

I believe that if I asked every parent I met if they had their kids' best interest at heart, almost all of them would say yes. I am extremely confident that the kids' response to the question, "Do your parents have your best interest at heart?" wouldn't generate nearly as many positive responses. So why is there such a disconnect between parents' intentions and their kids' perceptions?

First, we tend to have different time frames in mind: kids think about right now and parents often think about the kids' distant future. As parents, we often want our kids to do things now that will benefit them several years down the road. Adults rarely have the foresight or patience to engage in activities that will benefit us years from now, yet we hold our kids to this higher standard. It may well be in their best interest but it often isn't perceived that way.

Second, we don't always know what our own best interests are, so how can we automatically presume what someone else's might be?

Benevolence tips

- Actually ask your kids what they think their best interests are. What do they think success looks like for them?
- Be transparent when you're acting in their interests; help them create the story about why you do some of the things you do.
- Pay attention to what your kids like and care about. Showing interest and caring about what they care about is another way to demonstrate that you care about them.
- It's fine to have long-term goals for your kids, you just need to balance them with the shorter-term goals that matter for them. You have to earn the right to talk about the future.

Conclusion

I clearly can't distill all I have learned and experienced about trust and parenting in these few pages. The goal of this newsletter was to raise awareness about the role that trust can play in creating a healthier relationship with our kids. The hope is that parents find it helpful in realizing that they need to transition away from a command and control style as their kids mature. Hopefully some of the tips here prove helpful.

This topic is an intersection of the things that matter most in my life: my sons and my work on trust. I have found it interesting that when I raise this topic with a wide range of senior executives, the response has been extremely positive. The lessons we learn with our kids can of course translate to our attempts to build better relationships with others. Modelling these behaviours for our kids can be an incredible gift, as it will help them build better relationships through the rest of their lives.