

Holding on to Your Child's Trust

Having open communication with our children is something to which we all aspire. We want our children to be both willing to talk to us and to be able to confide in us and trust us with their worries and fears. Young children are generally very good at communicating with their parents, but more often than not, this changes as children enter their adolescent years. This can be alarming for parents. On one hand, we know that it is normal and to be expected, but on the other it engenders a level of fear... fear of the unknown. "What are they **not** telling me?"

Importantly, we must remember that it is the task of all adolescents to emancipate from their parents; to move from being a child who is completely dependent on the adults in their life, to being self-sufficient and independent in adulthood. It does not happen overnight and the process can be fraught and scary for child and parent alike. Some parents react poorly to the changing situation. Some children shut down communication to the bare minimum. It does not have to be this way.

In our work, it is not unusual for parents to tell us that their daughters do not tell them things any more, that they worry about the time their daughter spends in her room, often on social media, sharing their world with everyone (it seems) but them. We reassure you that to a large extent this is normal behaviour.

If, however, you want to put the effort into keeping the channels of communication open, there are things that you can do which may help.

One of the most important things to consider is how to respect your child's privacy. When a child confides her fears to a parent, however small, that child can feel humiliated and exposed when they hear the parent discussing the concern with their friends or the child's grandparents for example. It is normal for us as parents to discuss our parenting concerns with our close friends and family members, however we must be mindful of the child's perspective when we are heard discussing them. In our work we sometimes hear "I can't tell Mum this, she will tell everyone."

We do understand that "telling everyone" might just mean your daughter once heard you tell someone, maybe Nan, a piece of what she deemed her private information. But if your adolescent believes that you are going to share her worries and fears with her Nan, her aunties or your friends, she will become less likely to tell you about the boy she has a crush on, or that she worries about her stretch marks, or that she has made a mistake or done the wrong thing, or worse. If you want to be your daughter's confidante then you must respect the confidence she places in you and keep the things she shares with you private.

The same principle applies when sharing photos and information on facebook. If your child says "please don't", then don't. If you make a post that includes her and she does not like it and asks you to remove it, then remove it. It is not for you to assume it's Ok just because you think it is funny. Those embarrassing photos we once joked about saving for the 21st birthday party do not belong on anyone's Facebook page.

It is also important to allow your adolescent children to keep things to themselves. To this end, parents must resist the urge to interrogate. Of course, parents must always have important information that pertains to safety and wellbeing, but some questions can be left unasked.

You can encourage your child to talk to you firstly, by simply being available and interested (but not intrusive or pushy). Pay attention to the times when your child seems to be the most talkative and aim to make yourself available at this time. Try and find some time each week when you can be one on one with your child so they have the opportunity to talk to you in private. Do more listening than talking.

Model friendly banter at the dinner table. Share family news and talk a little about your own day. Let this be a place where no awkward questions are asked about test results or homework tasks, where your children can enjoy being with the family without the fear or worry of having to explain themselves.

We regularly encourage students to talk to their parents about everyday stuff, and to avoid only speaking to their parents when they want something. We encourage you as parents to do the same. Do not only speak to your children when you are telling/reminding them to do something or giving instructions.

Remember that your children are always looking to you to learn what normal looks like. Model the behaviours you want to see in your children. Be gentle and loving, avoiding judgmental, critical, harsh or angry responses, even when a strong response is required. Your child will often test you by telling you a small part of what is bothering them to see how you react before they tell you the rest.

Keeping the channels of communication open can be very challenging, especially as your children grow through adolescence. Be open to opinions that may be different to your own. Telling them your point of view is not the same as telling them what they must think. If your children know they can share their view and enjoy healthy open discussion, then they will be more likely to do so.

If things get too hard, and you are worried about your child or adolescent over an extended period of time, you might like to consider seeking professional help. We are happy to be contacted anytime for support and/or further referral.

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au