

## **The building blocks of trust**

### **Trusting relationships between parents, kids grow from clear rules, practical tools and quality time**

Every parent inherently wants to trust their child. But like a garden, it takes diligent cultivation to nurture that relationship – one that works both ways – amid the challenges of growing up.

Two area families share a few of the key building blocks that have helped them develop trust:

#### ***“Individual attention is important”***

For Mike and Gail Johnson, building trust with their 17-year-old son and two daughters, ages 16 and 11, is a process. From the time their kids were young, they talked about and established values that were important to them as a family, including rules against underage drinking and other drug use. Mike and Gail also put a priority on consistency – whether about bedtimes, staying on top of their kids’ schoolwork and eating dinner together.

That consistency also applies to special getaways. Once a year, since the kids were 5 or 6, Mike has taken each of the kids on a separate trip. In the early years they were day trips. As the kids got older, Mike and the kids together would plan their individual getaways. Sometimes they go out of town, other times they stay close to home. Regardless of the destination, it’s an opportunity to bond and *really* talk and listen to each other.

The trips, Gail says, are a different twist on the before-bed “cuddle time” as their kids move through the adolescent and teen years.

“It has that same magic,” she says. “It’s just the two of them; no one else is listening in. What they choose to do on the trips is secondary to the alone time. Just being away from your day-to-day environment makes you more comfortable. That individual attention is important.”

Last summer, Gail got into the act, taking her teenage daughter on a five-day trip by car. Gail says she and Mike make clear to their kids they are parents first, but the getaways, while not putting the parents on a “buddy” level with the kids, “create an environment of honesty and openness” where things can be shared in confidence. And that, she says, helps strengthen the foundation for honest, trusting relationships.

As their kids have gotten older, the family’s rules have expanded. For example, if their kids are invited to a party, Mike and Gail require in advance that they have the name, address and phone number of the parents where the event will be held. They call those parents to make sure their idea of a safe party matches Mike and Gail’s.

“Everybody in the house knows the rule, and it’s not negotiable,” she says.

Gail and Mike also role-play with their kids, practicing what they can say to avoid or remove themselves from risky situations. If they do find themselves in a dicey situation - where, say, alcohol is available - their kids know they can send their parents a text message and Mike and Gail will come and get them. Though they have a no-questions-asked policy, the foundation of trust they’ve developed has led to many instances where their kids volunteer details about the situation.

“It’s important kids know that you know how to be discreet and handle things in a way that they aren’t embarrassed,” Gail says.

The rule has helped their kids avoid potentially unsafe situations, like when their son, at 16, was out with friends but, because of a miscommunication, found himself alone at 11:30 at night in a part of town he didn’t know. He called Gail, and they worked out the safest place for him to wait while she drove the 45 minutes to get him.

Sometimes their kids encounter situations the family didn’t plan or role-play for, but because their kids know they can come to Mike and Gail and talk about situations after the fact it allows them to use those as teachable moments to avoid those situations in the future.

A prime example is when her son got a ride with a teenage driver. Only after he was in the car did he realize the driver was high. “He knew I wouldn’t be angry or judgmental,” Gail says. “That’s why you want to build trust, so they come to you and you can say, ‘I’m glad you’re safe, and let’s come up with another plan to get from point A to point B that doesn’t involve riding with this kid.’”

The Johnsons have experienced the inevitable bumps in the road. Regarding the family’s rule that requires Gail and Mike to contact other parents before their kids can attend an event, Gail says her kids sometimes say, “Mom, you don’t trust me.”

“I tell them, ‘You I trust. It’s the rest of the world I worry about. Our main job is to see you safely through to adulthood.’”

### ***“He knew we had the belief in him”***

Michelle’s two boys have very different personalities: Justin, now 18 and in his first year of junior college, tested the limits; John, a high school freshman, is more apt to stay out of trouble.

For both youngsters, though, Michelle has fostered a trusting relationship by simply believing in them, first and foremost, and demonstrating that belief in concrete ways. If Justin got into trouble, Michelle and her former husband - the boys’ dad - would wait to hear all sides of the story and then take appropriate action.

“It showed that we valued and believed in his word,” Michelle says. “Sometimes, we may not have liked what we heard, but he would tell you straight what happened. Down the road, when he needed to make other choices, he knew we had the belief in him. He learned it doesn’t work to (break the rules) because you’ll get caught, there’ll be consequences and you’ll miss out on things.”

Michelle led by example in communicating the family’s rules about avoiding alcohol and other drugs. She’s a moderate drinker and doesn’t have liquor in the house, and she keeps tabs on the limited alcohol she does store there. Michelle removed hard alcohol from the home after Justin, then a high school freshman, snuck sips of it.

Michelle, then and now, is firm and consistent in establishing rules and consequences, and requires her kids, when they have stumbled, to earn back her trust. In turn, she gradually loosens the reins. John, her youngest, also has benefited from seeing Justin’s mistakes and learning what not to do.

John - like Justin before him – knows that he can call his parents if he’s out with friends and finds himself in a risky situation. And he knows the family rules about avoiding substances and

meeting curfew. Last fall, John went to a party where there were upper classmen. Michelle talked with him about it beforehand and found out the particulars. At one point, John said, “Mom, a lot of good people will be there. I won’t drink or smoke, and if I need you I’ll call you.”

“So, he knew the drill,” Michelle says. “When he came home he told me about his night.”

Michelle says her kids’ involvement in sports has helped them stay busy in something positive, learn about commitment, and establish and meet their goals. It’s also expanded their support system, thanks to the encouragement and expectations of teammates and coaches. Justin, who quit baseball his junior year in high school because he felt a lot of pressure, later realized how much he loved it, got back into the sport the next year and is a member of his junior college team. Eventually, he’d like to play at the Division 1 level. He’s also passing on to his younger brother a little of what he’s learned along the way.

“(Justin) is making choices to work hard and set a goal for himself, and their dad and I have always said we support what they do,” Michelle says. “He just spoke with his brother and told him, ‘It doesn’t matter how good you are at sports, but the thing that will get you to a D-1 school is grades.’”

*This article was developed by Oregon Partnership (OP), a statewide nonprofit that exists to end substance abuse and suicide. For parenting resources, please contact OP at 503-244-5211, or visit [www.faceitparents.com](http://www.faceitparents.com) and [www.orpartnership.org](http://www.orpartnership.org).*