

Teaching the importance of trust

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As a preteen small town girl, I vividly remember walking past a phone booth, pulling down the coin return slot and being stunned as a huge amount of change fell into my cupped hands.

Knowing that I would be reprimanded if I were to return home late, I asked a passerby if he would do me a big favor and take the coins to the phone company. He agreed to do this for me, and I was incredibly appreciative and relieved that I'd now get home on time.

Returning home, I proudly relayed the story to my mom, who I knew would be so pleased by my initiative. Her pained expression told me quickly that I had erred and done something very wrong. Sadly, she explained to me that the stranger whom I had trusted might not return the money to the phone company, but she humored me and said that she would call and check.

Young and very innocent, I just could not imagine why he wouldn't bring the money to its proper destination, especially given that he promised me that he would. I had no fear of strangers and never once thought that someone might not tell the truth.

My naiveté continued, and that same year, a friend's father showed my friend and me a \$100 bill, sweetly offering to give us each one in the near future. He never did, and I never forgot his unfulfilled promise, not because of the money but because he was an adult who said he would do something, and then didn't.

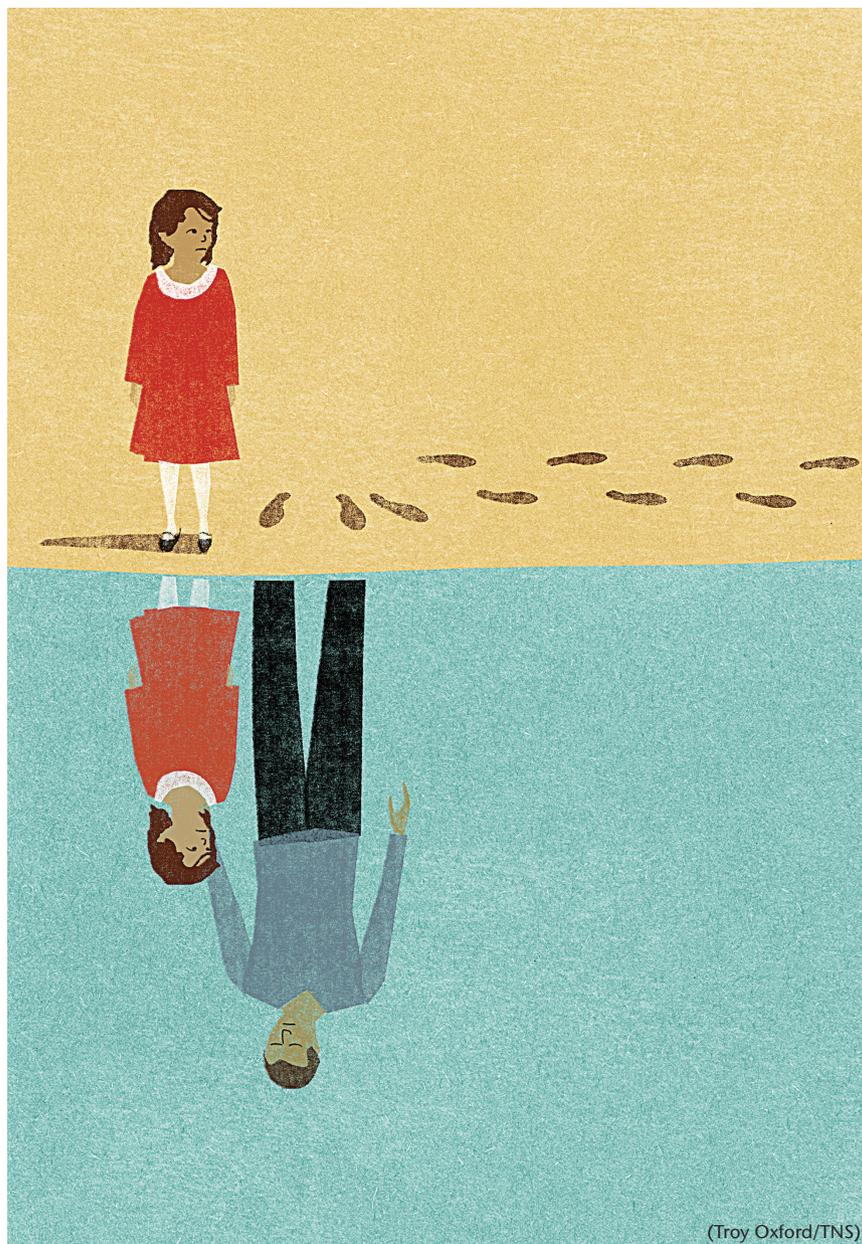
CHILDREN BELIEVE adults, and the day they realize that adults don't always tell the truth is a sad one. Having parents who keep their promises is not something one can assume. Unfortunately, in my practice I see many children and adults whose parents' promises meant little. They were constantly disappointed and had great difficulty in planning and predicting anything.

Studying the thought process of eight-to-11-year-olds in grad school, I smiled as I thought back to my stories. Children at this stage are very much rule-bound and concrete in their thinking. A promise is a promise, and honesty and integrity are very important to them.

I was brought up to keep my word, taught the importance of a good name, and was for the most part respectful of my elders, attributes not to be taken for granted in today's society. If asked to do something, there was no such thing as saying "no."

It never crossed my mind that an adult might not have the same values. If an adult said something, I was sure it was true.

Given these stories, and I am sure most readers have their own, one can understand how easy it is to



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be taken advantage of, and how the basis of trust, so essential in forming a healthy attachment to others, can easily be eroded with devastating consequences.

We cannot completely protect our children from the "big, bad world," but we have lots we can teach them in order to help them develop into mature, responsible and loving adults. Here are a few thoughts.

1. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Consistency is one of the most important messages you give your children.

2. Encourage children of all ages to speak the truth. Model this in all that you do. If, for example, you ask a child to tell a caller that you're not at home when

you are, what message do you convey to them? Children need to know that trust and speaking the truth go hand in hand.

My parents taught us that while they may be disappointed by our behavior, we would not be punished for speaking the truth, but if caught lying, there would be a consequence. As such, we never had a reason to lie or hide things due to fear or shame. Children need to know that while their behavior may be bad, you don't think that they are bad.

3. Be present and available to your children. Plan dates when just you and your child can go out and talk, for an hour or so. You can walk, grab a drink and be available to hear what they have to say. You want your child to feel he can tell you anything and that you value open communication.

4. Never be afraid to apologize. Children learn a tremendous amount when we demonstrate our ability to say that we are sorry.

5. Make time to interact with your child in a phone-free environment. One of the saddest comments children make to me is that their parents don't care, don't have time and don't listen. They're always busy on their phones. Even if it's untrue, if a child perceives it to be so, his hurt is very real.

6. Explain to children that not all they see or hear is true. Sometimes people will break a promise, say things they do not mean or even lie. There are good people and bad people and, sadly, sometimes, good people do bad things.

7. Children often don't have the words to describe their feelings and benefit from you giving such cues as, "You look really sad today. Is something wrong?" Children may show that they're upset in many ways – regression, withdrawal, attentional issues, bullying and a myriad of other behaviors.

8. Let children know that not all they see and experience in the world of technology is what they might expect or is true. Pictures, for example, are photoshopped, and advertisements are not always honest endorsements.

9. Children watching a scene constantly being replayed on TV can be traumatized thinking they're watching a series of separate incidents. Imagine if, on top of this, the story they see is false.

10. Teach children which people qualify as safe (at home, school and elsewhere), what is a safe place and, with respect to their bodies, what is safe/good touch.

11. Educate about bullies and teach children how to be assertive without being physical.

Learning to trust is basic to all relationships and is essential in the development of healthy, well-adjusted children. This gift is one that will last a lifetime. ■

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