



**CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION**  
*A SAMHSA Supported Drug-Free Community Coalition*  
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**ARTICLES 20 and 21 – July 30, 2008 and August 6, 2008 – Trusting Relationships**

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**The Ten Most Important Lessons Youth Have Taught Me About  
Building Trusting and Respectful Relationships With Them  
Part I and II**

**Part I**

The irrefutable truth is that everything learned in my 27 professional years about having healthy, working relationships with adolescents has come directly from the adolescents that I have had the privilege of interacting with over the years. There are lots of pearls of wisdom I have gleaned, but below I share the most dearest and meaningful ones:

- 1. Frame problems or behaviors as “healthy versus unhealthy” or “wounded versus in need of healing”.** When adults categorize behaviors, peers, or attitudes as good versus bad, youth shut down, stop listening, and arguments or power struggles result. When adults talk sincerely about their sadness or fear due to unhealthy behaviors, teenagers listen. It’s harder to argue with an adult when they are exhibiting compassionate caring.
- 2. Be honest about your feelings, even brutal ones.** Youth want and need us to be honest, even if the truth hurts a bit. If you are feeling a certain way and an adolescent notices and asks you about it, don’t try to hide the issue or feeling. Attempting to mask the issue will only result in less trust by the teenager. Teenagers have shown me how to be direct even if they have gotten angry or upset about what I felt I needed to say. They have told me that when they have seen me stay with the dialogue, despite the difficult nature of it, they feel empowered to do the same within our relationship. True honesty is often difficult, but totally important for strong and respectful relationships.
- 3. Always be real.** If you’re feeling off or ill, tell the truth and explain that it has nothing to do with them. Always practice what you preach. If you are trying to point a teenager in a healthy direction for growth, make sure you are pointed in that direction as well. Analyze yourself and seek resources as needed. Teenagers view that as a strength and see the person as worthy of their trust and respect.
- 4. Avoid throwing power around.** You may have power, but misusing it doesn’t help trust or respect grow. Teenagers need clear structure and limits and when they break those limits adults need to use the appropriate amount of power to pull the teenager back within safe parameters. Explaining firmly, but kindly, and then following through on consequences are the disciplinary steps that bring about growth in a youth and a deeper respect between the adult and youth.
- 5. Apologize when wrong.** Don’t worry that the teenager won’t respect you or trust you if you admit you have made a mistake and need to make amends. On the contrary, when adults hold themselves accountable and apologize when appropriate, teenagers respect us more for it and most of the time, they truly forgive us. In addition, when you admit your faults or mistakes, you are modeling self-accountability, responsibility, and the beauty of imperfection.

## Part II

6. **In an honest way, reflect and appreciate the complex uniqueness of youth and affirm their gifts.** If a teenager you care about makes a mistake or uses poor judgment, acknowledge your sadness in seeing them struggle or sabotage their gifts. Help them to learn how to be constructive rather than destructive.
7. **Don't assume that you know what is normal.** What is normal anyway? Teenagers ask that question all the time and adults don't often have the sensitivity or strength to grapple with it in any real way either. Allow teenagers to experiment with different personas or styles as long as their experimentation is not harming them. I overheard a wise parent recently say, "Yeah, I told him (referring to his 14 year old son), this new look of yours is interesting and fine as long as you keep your grades up, fulfill your responsibilities, and stay out of destructive activities like drinking or drug use..." Way to go!!
8. **Listen more, talk less.** Over the years, I have found professionally with my teenaged clients and their families, and personally with my own teenagers, that lectures and nagging reminders don't work. The way to understand a teenager while still respecting them is to listen, listen, and then.....listen some more! Adults do not have to always agree with what the teenager is doing or saying, but listening, truly hearing, what is trying to be communicated is a foundational block in the wall of trust and respect.
9. **Do more.** Teenagers appreciate adults' efforts when they attempt to get involved with them. Don't just support your youth in walking in the Crop Walk....walk in it too, even if your youth wants to hang with friends rather than walk with you most of the time. At the end, the experience of being in community together and the opportunities for sharing different perspectives about the activity are precious. Engage and relate with teenagers. Doing activities together, like hiking, biking, building things, cooking, strengthens the relational bond.
10. **Use quiet, simple consequences.** If your youth breaks a rule, such as driving the family car after curfew, remind them about the rule only once. Then, a simple, physical action, like taking the keys, disconnecting spark plugs, or blocking the steering wheel, is usually enough and more effective than long, boring lectures that teenagers grow numb to and adults just use to vent frustration. I will always remember the day a teenager said to me years ago, "I knew my mom meant business when instead of yelling or lecturing me about slamming my bedroom door, she took a hammer and a screwdriver and very quietly took the whole door off the hinges". No other words were ever needed again to help this youngster change that behavior.

Youth have wisdom in their teachings to us. Take time to listen and understand. When we are with them in caring and respectful ways, the beauty of their young lives and the energy they exuberantly express can be thoroughly appreciated.

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