How Do We Rebuild Trust?

You can slowly regain trust over time.

Think about a time someone greatly disappointed you and later earned back your trust. Did one apology fix everything, or did trust return because their actions became more dependable over time? What helped you begin to believe things might really be different?

Substance use can damage trust through lying, missing money, broken agreements, frightening situations, or promises that were not kept. Parents may begin checking everything because they are afraid of being fooled again. Your child may also feel frustrated. They may say, *"You never believe me,"* or *"What do I have to do for you to trust me again?"*

Trust does not return because someone promises to change. It slowly grows through experiences over time. That can start with small agreements that are clear and realistic. Your child says what they will do or not do and then you anticipate that they will follow through. As that happens more consistently, you may feel comfortable giving them more independence or relying on their word more often.

There may also be setbacks. One broken agreement does not mean that trust can never return, but it may mean slowing down and talking again about what needs to happen next.

Remember: **trust is a two-way street**. Think about how your words and reactions can either help your child feel safe enough to be open and honest with you or lead them to hold back because they don't want to upset you, disappoint you, or cause you more worry.

Rebuilding trust is not only about watching your child more closely. It also involves looking at how you communicate with each other. You can say, *"I want to trust you, and I know rebuilding trust will take some time. I think being honest with each other is important, even if we need to tell each other something that will be disappointing or upsetting."*

Situation

Your child asks to borrow the car to meet a friend. In the past, they drove after using substances and were not honest about where they were going. They insist that things are different now and become frustrated when you hesitate.

Instead of

Child: "Can I take the car for a couple of hours?"

You: "No. I just don't believe anything you say anymore."

Child: "But I haven't done anything wrong lately!"

You: "That doesn't matter. You've lied too many times."

Child: "So you're never going to trust me again?"

You: "How could I? You ruined that."

Child: "Then why should I even try?"

In this version, your fear is understandable, but the message your child hears is that the past has permanently decided the future. That can make rebuilding trust feel impossible for both of you.

Try this

Child: "Can I take the car for a couple of hours?"

You: "Not yet. I know you want me to trust you, and I have noticed that you've been more reliable lately."

Child: "Then why can't I take it?"

You: "I'm not ready for that because of what happened before. Trust is beginning to come back, but I need more time."

Child: "So what am I supposed to do?"

You: "First, keep up the good work with being more reliable. And, if you need a ride tonight, I can help you with that - or you can hire an uber."

Child: "Well, it's pretty annoying I can't use the car."

You: "Yes, I get that. We're not where we were before and we are also not where we need to be yet."

In this version, you acknowledge progress and keep a limit at the same time. Trust grows when words and actions become more consistent. You do not have to rush it, and you do not have to close the door on it.

Think about it

1. What specific actions would help you feel that trust is beginning to grow again?

2. Is there a small area where you could recognize increased trust without giving back all trust at once?

3. How would you respond if your child told you that they lied to you about a situation (e.g., where they went or who they were with)? Would you be willing to appreciate their honesty even if it's something you don't want to hear?

References:

Partnership to End Addiction. (2024). *The Partnership Model: A guide for peer parent coaches and families supporting a loved one with substance use challenges.*