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Parent Sanity Rule #1: *trust the child*

by Linda M. Clement

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Occasionally, this rule generates a shocked response, as if I had suggested they let the three-year-old drive. There are a couple of good reasons I recommend trusting kids... but here are the reasons I do not suggest being suspicious of kids, first:

1. Children will live up (or down) to parents' expectations. If kids are expected to be devious, mischievous imps, they have little reason not to be... besides, being a devious, mischievous imp has its perks, remember? Some of the results are uncomfortable for a long, long time afterwards, but for a moment or two the experience is sweet.

2. Children lack the capacity to think of themselves from any perspective but the first person until they are pretty old (13ish) so if they are distrusted by the people who are their closest allies they will have no way of seeing themselves as *potentially* trustworthy.

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Some suspicion of children is based in the perception that since we know, they know, and what we can understand with fully-developed adult brains, children understand. Both of these beliefs are incorrect. No human being has knowledge that has not been learned - at any age. Parents could forgive themselves more often for what they didn't know until they learned it, and they would find themselves more forgiving of their children's ignorance. More importantly, children do not have fully-developed adult brains which means there are concepts they simply cannot understand yet, and abilities that they will have to live longer to get.

Why mistrust fails

Distrusting children damages the parent/child relationship. For me, that's justification enough to trust a child. It isn't enough for many, so here's two more reasons:

1. Children learn their value from how they are treated by the important people in their lives. When they believe themselves to be really valuable, they make choices that reflect that knowledge even as teenagers. This includes doing things that retain their parents' trust and refraining from doing things that damage it.

2. Children who feel trusted escape the internal urgency to rebel, making living with them much more peaceful. Children who feel they are not trusted have a strong drive to prove the cynics wrong. In their effort to make the distrustful people wrong, children don't tend to figure out that the way to be right is to prove their

trustworthiness with upstanding behaviour over a long period of time.

What people do when they aren't trusted is rebel against all the rules they can find, because they see the rule-makers as the problem. What they do when they find they can't outright defy authority is weasel around the rest of the rules, searching for loopholes, and finding them often. Rare is the parent who thinks of *all* the possible ways a child might behave far enough in advance to forbid every option.

And herein lies my favourite reason to trust a child: it is so much *simpler*. I don't have to plot and plan to cut off every possible avenue, to keep a tight lid on everything my kids might think to do. I don't have to be ever-vigilant to ensure that my control is complete. All I have to do is trust myself, that I've got the skills and wisdom to guide my kids well, and trust that my kids have no pressing need to damage themselves or me or anyone else. Maybe this is really the Lazy Parenting Rule #1...

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