

I'd Like To Trust You, But Can I?: Extending Trust to Your Adopted Son or Daughter

By Arleta James, PCC

Kevin is 9-years-old. He was adopted as a toddler. Prior to his adoption, he experienced pre-natal alcohol exposure, neglect and physical abuse. The impact of this trauma continues to affect him to this day. At 9, he still tantrums like a two-year-old. He is rarely compliant without a lot of prompting and arguing, and he often destroys toys and household items. This morning, his Mom asked him to run down to the basement freezer and get some chocolate ice cream. Upon his return, Mom asked if he shut the freezer door. He immediately replied "Yes, Mom." Without another thought, the family moved on with their day. The next day, Mom went down to the basement to take care of the laundry. There sat the freezer with the door wide open! The family's extra meat had been thawing for over 24-hours! Mom was livid! Kevin had lied—again, and Kevin was irresponsible for what seemed like the millionth time!

Patty is age 14. She was adopted, via the foster care system, at age 6. She has been a difficult child from the start. She hoards food, steals, calls her mother and brothers names, has poor hygiene and she steals! She takes things from school, home and even church! Recently, for a school fund raising drive, Patty was given candy



bars to sell. As the time to turn in the money and any unsold candy bars approached, Patty's single mom, Mary, realized that Patty was \$20 short. Eventually, Patty confessed that she had spent the money. In effect, Patty had stolen money from her own fund raising campaign! Mary was beside herself. When could she ever trust Patty? How would the \$20 be replaced?

Nancy is 12-years-old. She was placed with Mike and Jane as an infant. Nancy was initially a foster care placement. After several years, Nancy's parental rights were terminated and Mike and Jane were able to adopt Nancy. Again, due to her early neglect, Nancy posed many behavioral challenges to this family. The

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family recently opted to get two kittens to help teach Nancy responsibility. Mike and Jane explained to Nancy that the new pets would be a way for her to demonstrate to them that she could be responsible. "This is a way for you to show us that you can be trusted. If you take care of the kittens well, then we can talk about the cell phone and some of the other things you want", said Mike and Jane. Yet, each day, Nancy required a reminder to feed the kittens and clean the litter box. There were many times that it was obvious Nancy didn't feed the kittens. Mike and Jane found themselves providing more care to the kittens than Jane. Jane seemed not to mind the pet's cries for food and fresh water.

All parents want to trust their children. So, parents provide opportunities for the child to demonstrate that he or she can be trusted. Most children rise to the occasion and show their parents they are able to listen and be responsible. As the child matures, mom and dad extend more privileges. The trustworthy child manages curfews, dating, school projects, etc., mostly in accord with their parents' wishes. Certainly, all children slip up once in a while, but grounding or removal of their ability to text their friends helps the son or daughter get back on track.

Children with a history of trauma, on the other hand, present ongoing issues with trust. As the examples above make clear, parents offer opportunity after opportunity for this troubled son or daughter to build trust. Over and over, the trust is shattered.



Why does this happen? First and foremost, we must come to understand that trauma interrupts "normal" child development. The child that is chronologically age 12 may really be functioning as a three- or four-year old. In essence, all children have a **chronological age** and a **social and emotional age**. Usually, the two are in **accord**. However, institutionalization, neglect, abuse, etc. cause a **discord** between the two ages. Trauma causes interruptions in the normal developmental process of learning to be responsible, truthful and in internalizing a positive set of moral and values—all of the areas required for trust.

Thus, parents must learn to parent their child with a history of trauma at his or her social and emotional age. We must start where the child is, and parent at that age. Over time, the child will "grow up" socially and emotionally. Then, the qualities essential for trust will emerge.

In order to [estimate your child's social and emotional age](#), read a good book on "normal" child development such as [Your Baby and Child: From Birth to Age Five](#), or [Ages and Stages: A Parent's Guide to Normal](#)

[Child Development](#). There are also online sources of child development such as the sites of [Zero to Three](#) and the [Child Development Institute](#). You could also observe typical children at the park, mall or Sunday school. Compare children of various ages to your troubled adoptee. Likely, you will see that your traumatized child has much in common with children ages 2 to 7.

Ask yourself, "Would I trust the family pets to a three-year-old?" "Would a four-year-old sell candy bars?" Likely, the answer to these questions is "no." When children are "young", we give them simple tasks, or we help them with their chores. Gradually, as they age, they clean their room on their own, rake the leaves, weed the flower beds, take care of their belongings, pack their backpack for school and so on. If your 12-year-old is really 3-years-old, have her help fold the laundry, rather than load and start the washer. Allow her to grow into being responsible for running the washer and dryer. Apply this same type of thinking with regards to other chores. In this manner, you are facilitating the development necessary to bring the social and emotional age into line with the chronological age.

Accept your responsibility in some of the "battles" and conflict created in your home. If you know your child steals money or food, perhaps you need to oversee the fundraising project. Rather than being angry after the money disappears or the candy bars are eaten, acknowledge that you had other choices from the beginning of this school project. Recognize that altering the impact of early trauma takes time—in many cases years are needed to move the fragmented development forward. In the meantime, think about your child's limitations and how you can help the child be more successful. Frequently, we set children up for failure because we go outside the boundaries of which they are capable. Neither child, nor parent feel good in the aftermath of such situations.

If you have other children in the home who are typically-developing, cue them into why their sibling is getting help cleaning his room, or doing his homework. Conduct regular family meetings to explain the challenges presented by the child who is struggling with trauma residue and mental health issues. Be clear about the problems, and the solutions you are implementing. Your "healthy" sons and daughters will have more patience and tolerance when they are kept in the loop. Frequently, these appropriately-developing kids offer some of the best ways of helping the adoptee. Their position in the family allows them to be observers. Given a forum, they contribute greatly to the quality of family life.

In conclusion, trust in yourself that you can learn to parent differently. As you make changes, your adoptee will begin to thrive and flourish. This, in turn, will lend to a happier emotional climate within your home for each member of your family.