

Who Is a Trusted Adult?

The study of child development and positive youth mental health includes understanding the role and impact of trusted adults on healthy physical, mental and social outcomes for children. [Research](#) from the Search Institute, the Institute for Education Sciences and other organizations has demonstrated that trusted adults provide an important benefit to the well-being of children.

Who Is a Trusted Adult?



- A trusted adult is someone who is not a parent/caregiver but is part of the child's safe natural network through family and other institutions.
- A trusted adult is chosen by the child. Among the child's safe natural network of adults, a child chooses to seek out a deeper bond with those they identify as trusted adults.
- A trusted adult who shares some similar values as the child's family and community network often has a special ability to inspire children to make positive choices in their lives.
- A trusted adult can spark positive outcomes for children who might not have other healthy adults in their lives.
- Most importantly, a trusted adult is someone who helps provide additional emotional support to youth, offering opportunities for prevention and intervention around issues that impact youth mental health.

What Youth Say Makes Someone Their “Trusted Adult”

- **Someone who “talks, not tells”:** Youth identify trusted adults by their willingness to listen and engage, rather than lecture and give orders.
- **Someone who offers support and encouragement:** Youth are often unsure of their own talents and interests, and how to navigate social relationships. Trusted adults help build their confidence in their ability to share themselves with others.
- **Someone who is a role model:** Youth often choose “trusted adults” who have characteristics, and/or work and interests that the youth admires and would like to develop for themselves.

A Trusted Adult Is a Support, Not the Solution

When your professional role or expertise is not in counseling or social work, being approached by a young person can be daunting when they want to share their feelings and experiences. Remember, your main role is to embrace the fact that the child sees you as a supportive, empathetic and compassionate person. This bond is a doorway for you to encourage the child to get additional support if needed, and if not needed, then just to listen and offer support.

Keep in mind that children are not often listened to or taken seriously by adults. Your act of listening with a caring ear has a powerful impact.

Things to Remember

- **Refer out:** Encourage youth to accept resources. You can listen, but the child and/or their family might need additional resources, such as counseling or other social services. Their trust in you could make a difference in encouraging them to reach out or accept resources being offered to them.
- **Set limits or “boundaries”:** Being there for a child does not mean instant access all of the time. Rather, being there simply involves letting the child know when you can support them, then acting consistently and being true to your word. The goal is to provide consistent access to support, with boundaries.
- **Transparency:** Remind the youth that confidentiality is not guaranteed if you feel they need additional support.



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Tips for Boundary-Setting

The term “boundary” is often used, but its meaning is not always obvious. A boundary is a set of expectations you have for yourself when interacting with others. You might have different boundaries with different people in your lives.

The Power of Being There

Know that you are making a difference, even by “just” listening. Here are a few general impacts and outcomes for youth who have at least one trusted adult in their childhoods:

- Less risk-taking behavior
- Higher self-esteem
- More motivation to succeed in school and other activities
- Positive employment outcomes later in life
- Improved physical and mental health

Additional Information

Interested in learning more about how to cultivate trusted adult bonds in the school environment? Check out this resource by the [Institute of Education Sciences](#) (IES), one of the regional educational research laboratories of the U.S. Department of Education.

For insights beyond the school environment, see also this resource from the [Search Institute](#) on the role of relationships in children’s lives. The Search Institute develops research and resources that promote positive youth development.

When Working with Youth, Consider Setting Boundaries Around:

Respectful communication:

- Acknowledge power dynamics. Becoming a trusted adult can encourage youth to open up to you, which is great. However, as an adult, you hold a position with specific responsibility to care for their well-being. This role creates a natural power differential. While their trust in you may lead them to start to connect with you as a peer, you should make sure to maintain some expectations around how they address and communicate with you.
- Clarify and reinforce expectations about respectful communication to prevent misunderstandings. These expectations vary from person to person, so clarifying them will help avoid feeling frustrated or causing the young adult to feel hurt.

Youth contacting you outside of work hours or the work site:

- Make sure you comply with the policies of your organization, and inform youth about what those policies are.
- Within these organizational policies, you may need to set additional expectations for how and when you are able to connect with youth.
 - Let youth know the specific hours you are available and when you are unavailable.
 - Be consistent about youth responding during the time frames you established, and gently reminding them of the expectations if they break them.
 - Being available “on demand” is not what makes you a trusted adult. Your consistency is what helps youth maintain their view of you as a trusted adult.

Appropriate support:

- Once youth trust you, they may seek you out for a range of support, which is wonderful! Always keep in mind that listening to youth, and appropriately sharing from your own perspective and lived experience, is very supportive.
- However, be prepared to redirect youth to professionals and/or their parents for support as appropriate. Your goal is to ensure that youth get the support they need, despite their tendency to seek all support from you due to the relationship they have built with you.

References

- DuBois, D. L., & Silverthorn, N. (2005). Natural mentoring relationships and adolescent health: Evidence from a national study. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95(3), 518-524.
- Meltzer, A., Muir, K., & Craig, L. (2018). The Role of Trusted Adults in Young People’s Social and Economic Lives. *Youth & Society*, 50(5), 575-592. Social and Economic Lives. *Youth & Society*, 50(5), 575-592.

