

PARENT GUIDE AND DATING CONTRACT

PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN(S) GUIDE TO THE DATING CONTRACT

Parent(s)/Guardian(s), the team at YM360 and MinistryToParents.Com have put together this resource to serve as a communication tool to set you and your teenager up for success in an area notorious for creating contention and stress. As with any resource, it's important to know why it has been created and how you are supposed to use that resource.

JUST PUTTING IT OUT THERE

- This resource is not a way to try to manipulate your teenager's behavior through a contract.
- This resource is not a way to shame your teenager if they don't live up to everything listed in the contract.
- This resource does not give you a way to sue your teenager if they breach a contract.
- We don't have any illusions that just because your teenager signs this or any contract, they will magically be able to live mistake-free or won't push back from time to time. You shouldn't have any illusions about that either.

None of the things listed above are why we created this contract. In fact, don't think of it so much a "contract" but instead as a communication and negotiation tool.

Whether you believe it or not, there is a negotiation happening in your home multiple times every day.

Your teenager is seeking freedom and autonomy. As loving parent(s)/guardian(s), you want nothing more than to allow them the freedom and autonomy they so greatly desire, but these things are earned through trust.

Your teen needs your trust to help them in their transition through to adulthood. However, this trust needs to be mutual. You and your teen need to meet in the middle and develop a healthy way to trust in each other and each of your decisions. **Remember that the more this mutual trust is tested, the longer it will take to get to a place where you are both confident you can trust each other.** A relationship without trust leads to second-guessing and questioning each other's honesty.

Trust often operates like a checking account. When your teenager makes wise choices, they are in a sense making a deposit into the trust account. When your teenagers make unwise choices, they are withdrawing from that very same trust account. The more trust that your teenager has built up in their trust account, the more freedom and autonomy you are willing to allow them as a parent/guardian.

There is really no reason to fight the fact that a trust economy exists in your home. In fact, if you will embrace it and learn to leverage it, you might discover a whole new world when it comes to a relationship with your teenager, one that is free from all the nasty negotiations.

THE TRUST ECONOMY

The inside of a home is much like the inside of our country. In our country, we have an economy where people want goods, and they trade currency for goods. There's a whole system built around that to make sure it's governed well. We've been able to see at times in our history that when the economy breaks down, the country breaks down along with the trust and the satisfaction of the people. But when the economy is doing well, the country succeeds, trust grows, and the people are happy.

In the same way, you're going to try to establish a trust economy in your home.

STEP 1: DETERMINE WHAT THE TEENAGER WANTS AND WHAT THE PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN(S) WANTS

Now, the first part of establishing a trust economy is figuring out: what does my teenager want? And then what do I want?

TEENAGERS WANT FREEDOM AND AUTONOMY.

- If your teenager is like most, they want to be able to have the freedom to say what they want to say, do what they want to do, and be around whomever they want to be around.
- They feel adulthood is coming and want to jump headfirst into it.
- They want all the freedoms of adulthood without any of the responsibilities that come with adulthood or the consequences of their choices.
- Let's be honest; these are some high and unrealistic real-world expectations.

PARENT(S)/GUARDIAN(S) WANTS A TEENAGER WHO IS TRUSTWORTHY AND MAKES WISE CHOICES.

- If you are like most parent(s)/guardian(s), what you want is to have a teenager who is responsible, kind, trustworthy, respectful, fun to be around, and who makes wise choices.
- You feel adulthood is coming for your teenager and want them to be able to do more than just make it out in the real world.
- You want them to earn and appreciate the freedoms you allow them, embrace the responsibilities that come with approaching adulthood, and own the consequences of their choices.
- Let's be honest; these are some high and unrealistic real-world expectations.

So, what we have here is an opportunity to create a trust economy.

STEP 2: ESTABLISH A TRUST ECONOMY

To establish a trust economy, you need clear communication, explanation, and expectation on both sides.

COMMUNICATION

- Ask your teenager, "What freedoms do you wish you had when it comes to dating?"
 - Allow your teenager to dream big dreams, say "crazy" things, and talk openly of what they wish they were allowed to do.
 - Hold back the urge to laugh or snatch them back down to reality. Instead, listen intently and ask follow-up questions to see what is behind that "crazy" freedom they wish they had.
- Say to your teenager, "Hey, do you want more freedom? Because, as your parent(s)/guardian(s), I/we want to make lots of freedom available to you. But the currency you use to purchase that freedom from me/us is trust. You earn trust by being trustworthy and making wise decisions. The more trust currency you deposit into your account, the more freedoms you can exchange it for."
- Sit down with your teenager and discuss signing this contract resource together.
- If you plan to use the contract resource as is...
 - Make sure you communicate this intention to your teenager at this time.
- If you plan to allow for discussion and edits of this contract resource...
 - Allow your teenager to provide you with some contract items that they think should be on there.
 - Share with your teenager some contract items that you, as the parent(s)/guardian(s), think should be on there.
 - Tell your teenager that you will consider all these things as you edit the contract.
 - Give your teenager a date and time that you will sit down together again to discuss the edited contract.

EXPLANATION

- If you plan to use this contract resource as is...
 - Take the time to walk your teenager through each line of the contract.
 - Make sure that under each line in the contract, you write down the consequence of breaking that particular line.
 - Allow for your teenager to ask any clarifying questions about any line in the contract.
- If you plan to allow for discussion and edits of the contract resource...
 - Share with your teenager the edited contract on the date and time that you communicated.
 - Walk your teenager through each line of the contract.
 - Inform your teenager if the particular line in the contract you are reading is up for negotiation or not. Take the time to explain why or why not.
 - Make sure that under each line in the contract, you write down the consequence of breaking that particular line (if it hasn't already been done in your edits).
 - Allow your teenager to ask any clarifying questions about any line in the contract.

EXPECTATION

- Be willing to negotiate on some items even if you use the contract resource as is.
- Be willing to explain why you are willing to negotiate on particular items and not on others.
- Make sure that your teenager understands that agreeing to this contract is their choice. Paint a picture of freedom. For example: Say something to your teenager like, "I/We know that you want freedom in your dating and relationships. I/We want you to have that freedom. I'm/We're willing to help you earn that freedom and trust. But that freedom and trust comes with this agreement. For me/us to provide you with that freedom, I/we need you to understand and commit to this agreement."
- Explain to your teenager where you will place the contract once signed by both parties. It needs to be in a place that is visible and seen often, like on the refrigerator.
- Make sure your teenager understands and can explain to you the consequence of breaking each contract item.
- Share with your teenager that this "contract" or an agreement, like all contracts, can be amended and even renegotiated as trust is earned.

Once that economy is established in your home, it sets a track for your family. A track to help you move toward building trust and a close relationship. Most of the fighting and bickering is handled when there is clear communication, explanation, and expectation about your trust economy.

STEP 3: CATCH YOUR TEENAGER DOING GOOD

The third thing you need to establish a trust economy is to catch your teenager doing good. Be on the lookout for all the things they are doing right.

Making wise choices

Being generous

Doing what is right

Being safe

Telling the truth even when it's hard

Being a good friend

Taking responsibility

Showing ownership of their choices and the consequences of those choices

Being kind

Every time you see them doing something that is making a deposit of trust currency, mention it to them. Let them know it matters and even why it matters. But also, maybe try to find ways to reward it from time to time.

Maybe say something like this to your teenager:

- "I/We noticed the other day you cleaned your room without even being asked. That meant so much and really showed that you are taking more responsibility. Here's some extra money to cover snacks for you and your friends at the movie tonight."
- "I'm/We're really appreciative that you text to say that you are still at _____'s house. I /We like knowing that you are safe. I/We know you all are having fun and that you're supposed to be home in 20 minutes for curfew, but because I/we trust you and know that you are safe, you can stay an extra hour."
- "Thank you for telling me/us the truth about making that poor decision. I/We know that it's hard to be honest when you know that you'll have to own the consequences of that poor choice. Owning your mistakes and the consequences of them is hard, but you earned some trust today in the way you have handled yourself."

You see, those kinds of statements are not quite often given to teenagers, and when they are it, makes a teenager's chest stick out, and they believe, "I'm not such a bad kid. I can earn trustworthiness."

That's what you want to do. **You want to build inside of them this belief that they are, at their core: trustworthy.** When you give them more freedom each time you see trust happen. You might just see a whole new teenager.

STEP 4: PAINT A PICTURE OF FREEDOM

One of the best things you can do as a parent/guardian is to paint a beautiful picture of freedom for your teenager.

When I was a young teenager, my father sat me down and said, "Listen, I know you want freedom. And I want to offer you that freedom. In fact, if you will honor your parent(s)/guardian, follow the rules of this house, and show yourself trustworthy, I'll give you so much freedom that by the time you're a senior in high school, you won't even have a curfew." When he said that, my eyes got huge. "Are you kidding me? I might not have to have a curfew? This is great!" Then he said, "But at the same time, if you make a choice to break the rules of this house, to disrespect your parent(s)/guardian, and you break trust constantly, then I will have to take away your freedoms. Having no freedom is a miserable way to live. But if that is what I have to do to help you grow in maturity and learn to make wise choices, then that is what I will do."

You see, my dad was setting up a trust economy. He was saying the power was with me. If I was going to choose to be trustworthy, I would earn freedom. If I chose to break trust, I would earn consequences. It was my choice to make. You can give your teenager that same choice!

Paint a picture for them of freedom. **Make it so beautiful that they can't resist it, and then teach them how they can earn it in the economy of trust.** This isn't just a principle for your family. It's a principle for life. In our jobs, in our relationships, in every area of life, really, there's an economy of trust. This is a great foundation place for you to teach your teenager not just a family skill but a life skill.

HOW TO BUILD BACK BROKEN TRUST

Now that we've defined the *trust economy*, let's talk about its greatest enemy.

What happens when that same teenager who is doing a great job, showing trustworthiness, and getting freedom all of a sudden is human and makes a huge mistake? A mistake that disappoints you, frustrates you, and even angers you.

You know what I'm talking about, right? The phone call that you get from the principal or the parent(s)/guardian who pulls you aside and says, "Hey, I don't know if you know this, but..." You hear horrible news of something that your teenager actually did. It's hard to refuse being lost in disappointment and anger.

The *trust economy* can help you navigate the process of helping your teenager rebuild broken trust after a big mistake is made.

If you want to guard against anything with parenting a teenager, you want to guard against them believing they're a "bad kid" or "irredeemable" when it comes to trust.

So how do you respond when your teenager makes a mistake or an unwise choice and loses trust?

STEP 1: EXPRESS DISAPPOINTMENT

Yes, express disappointment. They need to understand that the choice they have made and the action they have done is not okay. They also need to know why it is not okay. But make sure to pay close attention to where you are focusing your disappointment.

Teenagers don't make decisions in a vacuum, and they think much more about their decisions than we give them credit. There were other decisions prior to these that were thought about in advance and decided on because of particular values in his/her life.

It is true that a teen's choices can appear impulsive because many times those choices are illogical or shortsighted. It would be wrong, however, to conclude they didn't think before acting. They may not process information in the same way you do, but there is still a line of thinking that can be followed.

Remember, their conclusions typically stem from a value system. **Their decisions are being made because of a value they hold that may not be readily seen.**

When you find out that your teen has committed an inappropriate act, how do you respond? Where is your focus? If you are like most parents, all your energy focuses on the act itself. Why did he/she do that? Didn't they know they could get hurt? How can I keep him/her from doing it again?

What would it look like if we as parents held off on addressing the act until we find the value? Then determine where the thinking went wrong. Placing the focus on the act and stopping there, could miss the point of the act. It can also start a cycle of deceptive cover-up behavior that is much worse. Sadly, if your primary goal is merely behavior modification, then what your teenager takes away from the confrontation is, "Now I know what not to do in front of mom."

The behavior is an outward manifestation of their values. Those values may not be very different from your own, the conclusion they draw may be flawed, but the value is good. A goal for parent(s)/guardian(s) should not be simply to address the act itself, but to find out what value the act is rooted in.

As the parent(s)/guardian(s) instead of asking "why did they do this?" a much better question to ask is "what is it that my teen believes (value) that led them to conclude this was okay behavior (action)."

STEP 2: OFFER CONSEQUENCES WITH LITTLE EMOTION

Consequences are a fact of living in the real world. Everything you do and every choice you make has a consequence. It can be a good consequence or a bad consequence, but there will be a consequence for your choices and your actions.

Be it a good or a bad consequence, your teenager learns so much when they face the consequence that comes along with their choice or action.

The best way to offer consequences is with as little emotion as possible. Emotion takes you away from the actual issue at hand. Your teenager focuses on your angry outburst rather than the lesson that stands to be learned. I said, "as little emotion as possible" because I know you're human. There is no way to completely avoid angry outbursts and loud arguments. But if you can train yourself to react less and respond more, you will create a constructive environment instead of chaos.

STEP 3: GIVE THEM HOPE

This is the step that most parent(s)/guardian(s) miss when their teenager blows it big time. Give them hope.

One way you do this is to say something like, "After this consequence is over, I/We will be watching your decisions, and will come back to you at some point to acknowledge that you've learned from this mistake. At that point, you will have restored trust with me/us. Would you be willing to work with me/us to learn from this decision and move forward together?"

Then help your teenager come up with a measurable way to show that they have earned trust. Don't just say, "One day, you'll be able to restore trust with me/us." Tell them, "Two weeks. I'm/We're going to give you a two-week window. If you can show that you've learned from this mistake, I'm/We're going to come back to you and say that it's as if it never happened: trust restored."

Give them an amount of time that they can do. Your teenager might be in such a bad season where you have to say to them, "You have two days, and in two days, if you can make good choices, we'll restore trust."

You want them to succeed.

At the agreed-upon time, make sure to be faithful to meet with them and communicate, "Hey, you know what? I've/We've watched you. Yes, it was horrible that all that happened. Yes, you endured your consequence and you're through it now. And no, I've/we've watched you for a period of time, and I/we want to say to you: you're not a bad person. You've learned from this. You can move on now. And now, let's just keep getting back to earning trust and giving freedom. I/We want to give you freedom. I/We love you, and I'm/we're rooting for you."

What a great opportunity!

When your teenager makes a mistake, what they need the most is the hope that it is possible for them to earn your trust again. When you establish the *trust economy* in your home, and your teenager has a way to earn trust and re-earn broken trust your family is set up to thrive and grow together.

DATING CONTRACT

I WANT TO HAVE FREEDOM to date and to make my own choices when it comes to dating. My parent(s)/guardian(s) wants to trust me to make wise choices with dating.

This document will help my parent(s)/guardian(s), and I agree on the kind of choices I can make that will earn their trust and give me the freedom that I want.

IN ORDER TO EARN TRUST AND EARN FREEDOM, I AGREE . . .

1. That the ability to date while in junior high or high school is a privilege and not a right. This privilege can be adjusted, restricted, or revoked at any time and for any length of time.
2. That the items listed within this document are for my safety and overall well-being. I know that my parent(s)/guardian(s) love me more than anything in the world. I also understand that my parent(s)/guardian(s) wants to give me freedom while also giving me clear enough boundaries to help me make wise/God-honoring choices.
3. That while in a dating relationship, it's easy to lose track of time and become distracted. In doing so, I run the risk of neglecting my responsibilities, priorities, commitments, and even other important relationships. Therefore, I agree to continue to prioritize my family, grades, extracurricular activities, church involvement, friendships, and my personal walk with Jesus. I will not allow these to be run over by my emotions.
4. That I will demonstrate wisdom when considering someone I would date. I will ask and honestly answer questions about the individual, such as:
 - Does he/she proclaim to be a follower of Jesus?
 - Does he/she demonstrate and live out their faith openly? How?
 - Does he/she have a reputation that I would want myself linked to?
 - Does he/she make me a better person when I'm with them?
 - Does he/she ever cause me to feel uncomfortable or compromise my boundaries?
 - Does he/she treat others well and with respect (peers, older, younger, authority figures)?
 - Has he/she had many significant others, and if so, how many and how often?
 - Is he/she someone I would feel good about a younger sibling dating if they were the same age?
5. That there are people in my life who have earned my trust and who may have a much clearer perspective of my relationship than I am able to see. I agree to actively seek their counsel, listen to their advice, and strongly consider their perspective without complaining or attitude.
6. That I will place honoring, respecting, and protecting his/her sexual integrity, moral boundaries, dignity, reputation, and overall well-being above my own feelings, wishes, or desires.
7. That as part of honoring, respecting, and protecting his/her sexual integrity, moral boundaries, dignity, reputation, and overall well-being, I will:
 - Never allow us to be alone at either home.
 - Always make sure that the doors are open to any room we are in together.
 - Never ask, push, or make light of his/her moral, physical, or spiritual boundaries.
 - Never ask for or send sexual texts, photos, or videos.
 - Will honor the curfews and rules set by the parents.

8. That I will respect his/her parent(s)/guardian(s) wishes, rules, and boundaries. And I will expect him/her to respect my parent(s)/guardian's wishes, rules, and boundaries.
9. That I will always have my cell phone on and will answer any call or text from my parents immediately.
10. That I will inform my parent(s)/guardian(s) of where we are going, when we arrive, and when we are leaving to come home by phone call or text.
11. That I will always go where I say that I am going and leave when I say that I am leaving. If we make any changes to those plans, I will inform my parent(s)/guardian(s) immediately with a phone call or text.
12. That I will always be honest with my parent(s)/guardian(s) when it comes to questions concerning dating or my boyfriend/girlfriend, even when I know that my answer might get me in trouble or disappoint you.
13. That I understand how being disingenuous about my location, destination, arrival time, and departure time or how hiding anything is a break of trust in our relationship.
14. That I will not break trust with my parent(s)/guardian(s) by trying to sneak over or sneak out to meet him/her.
15. That I will not add or use apps that allow me to get around settings or hide things on my phone or devices concerning my relationships.
16. That I will not use or be with someone who is using alcohol, tobacco, weapons, or drugs. I understand that them doing this with me present is not a part of honoring, respecting, and protecting my integrity, moral boundaries, dignity, reputation, and overall well-being.
17. That if I ever feel unsafe or uncomfortable while on a date or with someone, I will call or text my parent(s)/guardian(s) or another approved adult come to get me.
18. That if I receive suspicious, inappropriate, harassing, bullying, or concerning chat/text messages from someone I'm dating or considering dating, I will tell my parent(s)/guardian immediately and ask for their help deciding what to do next.

Both the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the recipient of this contract agree that if and when trust is broken, it can and will be restored. There are two parts to restoring trust. The individual who broke the trust will experience a consequence first, and then they will display trustworthy behavior for a set period of time. Once those two trust builders are complete, the parent(s)/guardian(s) will notify the individual who broke the trust that the trust has been restored.

TRUST BUILDER #1: What is the agreed-upon consequence of breaking any of the above agreements? *(You can assign and list below different consequences to different item numbers listed in the contract.)*

TRUST BUILDER #2: What is the agreed-upon period of time that the individual must display responsible behavior before trust is restored? *(You can assign and list below different consequences to different item numbers listed in the contract.)*

IF I MAKE THESE GREAT CHOICES...

I earn more freedom, and my parent(s)/guardian(s) commits to trusting me with dating. I also avoid arguments, lectures, and consequences that aren't fun at all.

IF I DON'T MAKE THESE GREAT CHOICES...

I will face the consequences of having the privilege of dating adjusted, restricted, or revoked for the agreed-upon amount of time.

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Signature

Date

Recipient Signature

Date