

# Building Relationships of Trust with Children

Vinita Rocha

We live in a world that seemingly does not allow trust easily. In my opinion, among the many dimensions that need to be developed in a child during her/his school years, building trust as a socio-emotional skill is one of the key ones. Trust is confidence in the integrity of a human being. It assumes that others generally have good intentions, but sometimes the circumstances in which they live, leave them with no option but to constantly operate with fear and lack of trust. Sometimes, the lack of basic resources prompts children into negative behaviour, such as a lack of respect for the self, surroundings or even misdemeanours, like theft.

Teaching values to children in schools must run alongside other developments and requires continuous and consistent effort. And even as we strive to have our children achieve academic excellence, we must ask ourselves how we can help them imbibe values and learn socio-emotional skills, such as trust. However, is it possible to teach trust as a socio-emotional skill?

## A learning experience

The following anecdote was as much a learning for me as it was for the children I work with. As part of my school visits, I encourage children to visit the library, help them choose books for themselves and facilitate the issue of books in the library register. The range of books with illustrations and colours available in the library is the reason many children are interested in getting at least one book issued per week, even if they are not able to read it entirely.

My effort has been to encourage them to take these books home and feel the wonder. Initially, getting them to return the books was a challenge. But as time passed, the ongoing conversation that they could borrow another book on returning the one they had, has proved fruitful.

On two earlier weekly visits, I had refused to issue a book to Sreekanth of class IV. Sreekanth, like many others in the school, has little awareness of his self-image and surroundings and, also, little concern for his belongings. He has learning difficulties as his mother tongue differs from the medium of instruction in the school. He has few friends and the teachers too do not have a good image of him,

considering him a poor learner.

This was the third time he had approached me and this time too, I paid no attention to his prolonged plea and did not issue a book to him because of his not having returned the book he had borrowed earlier.

Sreekanth is a persistent boy. He tried his best for twenty whole minutes to convince me that he had returned his previous book *Everything Big Cats*. It seemed like he really wanted to borrow a book this time and so he repeatedly pleaded with me to believe him. I remembered an earlier occasion too when he had not been honest, so I held my ground. I told him clearly that it was very important for there to be an entry in the register and, as per the record, there was no confirmation that he had indeed returned the book he borrowed.

Repeated conversations are conducted with children to ensure accountability. Therefore, after twenty long minutes of his asking and my calm responses, Sreekanth nudged his friend to return to class with him.

I had never seen him so persistent in all my interactions and so it set me thinking about whether I had actually made a mistake; if it was indeed true that he had returned the book. I decided to recheck the register. I now noticed an entry, which had a rather unclear date of return. Deciding to give him the benefit of doubt, I picked up the book he wanted and walked to his class and said 'Sreekanth you can have this book'.

The smile on his face was one of pure joy and something that I will always remember. There was disbelief as well. It was as if he was asking, 'Have you really come for me? Are you actually acknowledging in front of the whole class that I had returned the book?' Now I felt completely convinced that the book was indeed somewhere in the library and felt bad about not having given him the benefit of doubt earlier.

The day went on as usual and when the bell rang for the day, another boy from class IV walked up to me in the corridor. He said he wanted to return a book and handed it to me. I thanked him, walked back to the library and sat down to make a last

book entry for the day. It turned out that the book was *Everything Big Cats!*

All kinds of thoughts flooded my mind once again. Had the book actually been returned by Sreekanth? Was it the other boy who had borrowed it? There was no record in the register of the book being issued out to anyone again. Could there have been a slip-up on my end? I wondered if I mistrusted Sreekanth only because of my preconceived image of him.

Questions in my head remain unanswered. The road is long, and many more conversations and incidents may bring about mutual trust and a sense of responsibility.

### Lessons from this incident

Most educators focus primarily on the cognitive learning and development of children. Little is done consciously when it comes to their socio-emotional development. For holistic development to take place, teaching socio-emotional skills have to go hand-in-hand with the development of cognitive skills. It is important to put in small conscious efforts every day for change to happen.

Everyday school and incidents provide a good enough framework for all of us to have continuous conversations for the development in these areas. Cognitive and socio-emotional domains are interdependent. Sometimes it is just the little things done consistently or the little things noticed in time which can contribute immensely to the socio-emotional development of a child.

### Insights I gained

In my understanding of working with children, I have tried to follow some pointers that I believe result in more trusting relationships between teachers and children.

- First and foremost, it is important to treat a child with respect and care
- Give opportunities to every child in the class to handle tasks. Otherwise, invariably, the more responsible children end up handling most of

the school tasks

- Gently introduce consequences and rewards, though not necessarily in the same order because it is possible that when a child is rewarded, it may have positive consequences
- Allow for mistakes
- Listen to the child's point of view and focus on the effort, not the outcome, that is, whether the child succeeds or not
- Reinforce positive attitudes and actions
- Have continuous conversations on why a child may be doing what he/she is doing in a particular manner
- Allocate time for reflection both to the child and the teacher
- Teachers' efforts need to be consistent over time for the children's behaviour to be moulded
- Create a threat-free environment

### Change needs time and patience

The impact of our efforts may not be visible in the span of our working life, but the passing of years has taught me that the impact of a positive effort comes over a period of time, and mostly when least expected.

The breadth of our curriculum, syllabus and the number of children in each class make it difficult for a teacher to focus on all the developmental domains of every child. As educators, we must understand that love, trust and accountability between teachers and students are a two-way process and wellbeing in school means the wellbeing of both the teachers and the students.

Creating an atmosphere of wellbeing is about relearning values ourselves. If we enable children to adopt and internalise self-awareness and care, it can result in overall positive behaviour. If done in a gradual and integrated manner, it will help children understand and manage trusting relationships that will bring about positive changes in the school's culture as a whole.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



**Vinita Rocha** is Resource Person at the Azim Premji Foundation and works with government schools in Bengaluru city. She has been a practitioner in the field of education for over a decade and believes children help her grow. She may be contacted at [vinita.rocha@azimpremjifoundation.org](mailto:vinita.rocha@azimpremjifoundation.org)