

## Askable Adult Campaign

# SKILL BUILDING

# TOOLKIT

Be someone they  
can talk to.

Vermont's children and youth say they want more informed, approachable adults they can turn to for help in navigating stress and challenges on a day-to-day basis. In this toolkit, learn how to become an askable, trusted adult for the youth in your life by:

- Establishing trust
- Staying connected
- Communicating effectively
- Being a resource



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# BUILDING TRUSTING & AFFIRMING RELATIONSHIPS



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Trust is the assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, and integrity of another person or thing. To trust someone is to feel safe being vulnerable with them. Youth are more likely to come to you with their concerns if they trust you. Vermont's youth have said they're most likely to trust adults who are non-judgmental, respectful, reliable, fun, kind, caring, and supportive. Trusting, affirming relationships are built in small moments over time.

## TIPS FOR ESTABLISHING TRUSTING, AFFIRMING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE:

**R-E-S-P-E-C-T.** Youth identify feeling respected as central to having effective relationships with adults. Adults who are askable for children and youth hold respect as a core value and work hard to maintain it. You are respecting youth when you accept them for who they are, regardless of their circumstance or behavior, and without judgment. How do you know if you're being respectful of youth? Consistently ask yourself: *Would I treat another adult this way?*

**Keep confidential things confidential**—or if you're not able to do that, be honest about that upfront. It is important to youth that adults don't share their information without permission. They also expect that you are honest with them about your ability to keep their information confidential. Be transparent upfront about any obligations that you have to report abuse. If you are concerned about a young person's welfare, be clear with them about your concern and let them know if you feel you need to tell someone else. For instance, say, *I'm a mandated reporter of child abuse, which means that if you share anything with me that makes me concerned for your safety, I may have to report it.*

**Check your own agenda.** Even well-intentioned adults can get lost in their own agendas. Check yourself to make sure that you're meeting the needs of the youth in your life and not expecting them to meet yours. Simply asking yourself periodically WHY you are in relationships with youth is a good way to check in with yourself.

**Allow space.** Remember that young people are in the process of developing their identities and values. Give youth the space to reach their own decisions and the information they need to do so in an educated way. Believe youth, especially queer youth, when they tell you who they are. Trusting relationships are formed when youth understand that they are not required to share your values in order to be loved and respected by you. Try silence: Silence gets you out of the way and creates a space others will fill in with themselves.

**Share power.** Remember that our society grants more credibility and authority to adults than to youth. This means that you have more power than they do. Be honest and clear about the power that you have as the adult—as a parent, teacher, or member of a system that you work within. Sharing your power is an important way to respect youth. You can do so in several ways:

- Support young people to make decisions about the activities you do together and what you talk about.
- Be patient and allow silence and space for them to offer ideas and to feel open to lead.
- Include children and youth in decision-making, even when you have to make the final call. When you disagree, take time to understand each other's point of view.
- When youth are challenged by something, help them think through their options by asking questions rather than solving their challenges for them.

**Watch your assumptions.** Pay close attention to your assumptions and how you react to what young people do or tell you. Assumptions can cause adults to react in ways that indicate judgment which can create a negative interaction. These three skills can help:

- Learn to identify your assumptions (*She needs my wisdom to fix this problem*).
- Every time you catch yourself making an assumption, make an observation instead (*She didn't ask for my advice*).
- Based on your observations, ask questions, listen carefully, and learn (*Do you just want to talk and me listen?*).

**Pause, reflect and let go of judgment.** It is as important to pay attention to your own reactions as it is to listen to youth. If you find yourself having a strong feeling, pause and reflect before you react or respond. Before acting on a feeling, ask yourself how you'd respond if this was another adult. Are you making an unhelpful judgment? Building trust requires letting go of judgment. If a child or youth senses that your acceptance of them is conditional, they won't feel safe bringing up sensitive topics that they fear might cost them your approval. You don't have to agree to support a child or youth. If something arises that makes you worried for the youth's safety, express that concern to them in a way that shows you care about them.

**Keep your promises and do your best to show up!** If you make a promise, keep it. If you can't keep promises, don't make them. And, we all know that real life can interrupt commitments. The important thing is that you do your very best to show up and, if you can't, be honest and consistent in your communication.

**Don't give up!** Believe you can do it! Understand that it can be challenging.

**Resources:**

[www.searchinstitute.org](http://www.searchinstitute.org); <https://cssp.org>

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# COMMIT TO CONSISTENT CONNECTIONS



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Children and youth who have consistent and strong connections to adults in their families and communities are more likely to have a solid sense of belonging and security. Connection fosters wellbeing across racial, ethnic, cultural, geographic, and socioeconomic characteristics. Your strong commitment to maintaining consistent, predictable, dependable, and safe relationships with the youth in your life will make you a more askable adult for them.

## TIPS FOR STAYING CONNECTED WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE:

**You matter to me is the message that all children and youth in your life should get from you.** No matter your relationship to them—parent, teacher, youth worker, neighbor, family member—this message should guide all of your interactions with the young people in your life. Tell them that they matter to you and show up for them over and over again.

**Be consistent, predictable, dependable, and safe.** Relationships have predictable stages:

- **Checking it out for safety:** Children and youth, especially those who've experienced high levels of stress and trauma, often expect disappointment, abandonment, lack of genuineness and negative outcomes. Help ensure physical and emotional safety by offering comfortable, accepting environments that honor individual differences and encourage youth to ask for what they need. Do youth have decision-making ability when they are with you? Are there symbols in your space that indicate you value diversity and difference?

- **Testing limits:** Expect some limit testing as youth seek to learn about your role in their lives and ensure that you accept them for who they are. Be forgiving of a youth's desire for reassurance and retesting to explore how consistent, predictable and dependable you are. For youth who've experienced trauma, this may take longer than you might expect. Respond to youth with unconditional positive regard—the idea that you will not change your attitude or actions toward them based on something they say or do. Remember, you are in it for the long haul.
- **Genuineness:** People who are attached tend to be more comfortable with each other. When trust is built in small moments over time, creating predictable, dependable connections, the trust deepens; anxiety decreases; communication is smoother; and feedback and modeling have more meaning.

**Pay attention.** Focus on children and youth when they are talking about things that matter to them. Put away your cell phone, make eye contact if it is comfortable for them, listen hard and believe what they say.

**Follow up.** Maintain contact with young people when you know they are going through something challenging rather than waiting for them to bring it up again. Send a quick text or emoji to remind them that you are present.

**Make time for lightness.** Bring humor, fun, and laughter when appropriate.

**Help youth navigate stress.** Children and youth experience stress at home, school, and in their communities. Sometimes this stress is normal and manageable and sometimes it is complex and toxic. You can help youth learn how to manage stress. This can be by simply encouraging them to do things that they love like sports, writing, music, or art. It can also be sharing tools for mindfulness that help focus in on the sights, sounds, and other physical sensations in their immediate environment like meditation, yoga, relaxation, and breathing.

**Find satisfaction in doing things for and with them.** You may find yourself sitting on cold bleachers or in hard seats at a three-hour band concert, but youth will notice your effort and feel more connected with you because you have shown up for them. It's important for youth to believe that we value spending time with them.

**Shift levels of support.** Give more support when young people are struggling, and less when they are coasting. Tides can turn quickly for them and they will most likely reach out to you again soon.

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# COMMIT TO CARING COMMUNICATION



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Effective communication between adults and youth is critical to building connections. Both how adults communicate with youth and what they communicate about are important. You can become more askable by communicating in a way that sends the message that you are approachable, willing to do the work, and that you care.

## TIPS FOR ENGAGING IN CARING COMMUNICATION WITH THE YOUNG PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE:

**Put away judgment.** It's the number one concern for youth in their relationships with adults.

**Ask what they need then listen deeply.** Youth most often just want to be listened to and heard. Adults most often jump right into problem-solving. When a young person comes to you to talk, ask if they just want to vent and be listened to or if they want feedback and to problem solve. If you make this your good habit, youth will feel heard and you will know what they need.

**WAIT! Why Am I Talking?** Ask yourself this a lot. Sometimes adults dominate conversations with children and youth because we feel we need to always be teaching them what we know. Youth often want useful advice, but not always—sometimes they just want to be listened to. Balance talking with listening. Try a 1:3 ratio where children and youth drive the conversation: For every 15 minutes, are you talking more than 5?

**Lean in. Be interested and learn.** Be interested and curious about what matters the most right now to the children and youth in your life. Ask questions! Ask them how they are doing, what excites

them, what their hobbies are, and how their relationships are going. Ask about and validate their concerns and worries. Work to understand young people's points of view when they share ideas or opinions. Learn from young people—and show it. Youth have a lot to teach adults. Let them know when you've learned something from them that you're excited about.

**Talk about your boundaries and limits.** All adults have limits and boundaries in their relationships with youth whether you're a parent, teacher, youth worker, family member or friend. Young people appreciate knowing what limitations exist for you. Telling them upfront models honesty, dependability, predictability, and integrity and helps youth talk about their own boundaries and succeed in their communication with you. For example, let youth know your limits about connecting on social media and what your boundaries are around time of day and best ways to communicate (texts, email, phone calls, etc.).

**Support their processes and remember yours.** Emphasize mistakes as necessary parts of learning. Praise youth for hard work, whether they succeed or fail. If it is helpful, ask if they'd like you to share how you managed relevant situations when you were their age. Remember careful boundaries when deciding what personal information to share; you don't have to tell them everything to show meaningful support.

**Be a source of appraisal and honesty.** Children and youth appreciate positive and honest feedback (*Your hard work really paid off! or I see that you're struggling here*), affirmation (*You have really grown since solving that problem!*), and constructive feedback (*Do you want feedback? Another way to approach this might be...*).

**Understand what's happening in their lives.** Use what is happening in pop culture, the news, and daily life as conversation starters. Take a shot at listening to music and watching media that is important to the youth in your life. Or, ask them what they're listening to/watching these days. Then, let them lead the conversations.

**Revisit difficult conversations in small doses.** This will show that you care and are able to give conversations room to grow and evolve as you each become more comfortable.

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# BE A CURIOUS CO-PILOT



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*You've been asked: NOW WHAT?* Youth don't expect adults to know everything—but they do appreciate honest responses and helpful information. Your willingness to be honest, ask good questions, think out of the box, share your own experiences, and collaborate to find information will make you more askable to the children and youth in your life.

### TIPS FOR BECOMING A USEFUL RESOURCE:

**Be honest and direct.** Although it might be a challenge, answer questions as honestly and directly as you can.

**It's ok if you don't know the answer to something or know just what to say.** Be willing to explore! You might be "askable" but you don't know everything! If you don't know the answer to a question, collaborate with children and youth to find helpful information. Be comfortable with silent spaces—just listening and asking questions might be perfect. Many of the topics young people want guidance about are personal—and therefore difficult to talk about. It helps to take questions at face value without reading too much between the lines or making assumptions or judgments.

**Break it down.** When youth are trying to solve a problem, help youth break it down into smaller, more digestible pieces. Help them find their own solutions by asking curious questions (*So, what could you do differently to tackle this problem?*), rather than telling them what you would do. You can help by acting as a sounding board and asking questions to encourage self-discovery.

**Ask helpful questions; youth probably have the answer themselves.** When young people are challenged by something, help them think through their options by asking questions rather than solving it for them. Try these questions: *What have you already tried? Have you ever had a similar problem; what worked? Do you need more information? Can I support you in getting what you need or want?*

**Think outside of the box!** Offer information and practical help to solve a practical problem, loan something they may need, offer to connect them to other adults or resources, give them a ride, help them find a job or work on their college essay, throw a baseball, or turn music pages for them.

**Broaden the web of relationships.** Connect young people to others who share their interests or can expand their world. Ask about and encourage their development of meaningful relationships with other adults. Support youth to explore what relationships in their lives bring them comfort, including those with peers and pets.

**Look up local and other resources together.** Work with youth to find helpful resources and information. Model by sharing about times that you have asked for help.

**Youth want meaningful conversations and practical information about their concerns. It's ok to google it!**

- For ideas on how to talk with young people about drugs and alcohol, check out [parentupvt.org](http://parentupvt.org)
- What about sexuality and sex ed? Try [lets-talk.how](http://lets-talk.how) and [advocatesforyouth.org](http://advocatesforyouth.org)
- Check out *Relationship Status* on the [vtnetwork.org](http://vtnetwork.org) site to talk together about navigating dating and romantic relationships: <https://vtnetwork.org/relationship-status-booklet>
- For ways to support children and youth in managing stress at home, school, and in their everyday lives:
  - ▶ Look for youth mindfulness activities on [positivepsychology.com/category/mindfulness](http://positivepsychology.com/category/mindfulness)
  - ▶ Find guidance for parents at [bradleyhospital.org](http://bradleyhospital.org) by searching for "managing stress in teens"
  - ▶ And search for the *Teen Stress Management Plan* on [healthychildren.org](http://healthychildren.org)

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