

# Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:  
Civilian

## How Trust Grows: Teenagers' Accounts of Forming Trust in Youth Program Staff

Griffith, A. N., Larson, R. W., & Johnson, H. E. (2017). How trust grows: Teenagers' accounts of forming trust in youth program staff. *Qualitative Psychology*. doi:10.1037/qap0000090

**SUMMARY:** Youth programs focus on a variety of skills and tasks, but this study reviewed the common theme of how youth build trust in their program leaders. Through interviewing youth, the authors determined sequences whereby leaders behaved in ways that built up youth, who in turn increased their trust in leaders. Based on these findings, youth benefited from this increased trust in many ways.

### KEY FINDINGS:

- Leaders of youth programs who enjoy high levels of trust from youth tend to be evaluated by youth as having benevolence, abilities to help youth, and integrity.
- Leaders supported youth work in their programs through demonstrating confidence in youth, entrusting them with responsibilities, providing help on tasks (especially ones that were emotionally challenging) and giving positive but straightforward and helpful feedback.
- Leaders interacted with youth as a whole person by helping them with practical needs, such as lunch or a ride home, being emotionally in tune with and responsive to them, and exchanging interests and stories with youth in a genuine way.
- Youth's observation of leaders' behaviors increased their trust by seeing how leaders led the program over time, watching how leaders interacted with other youth, and combining their experiences into global judgments of the leaders.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Educate youth program leaders in developing skills to build trust with youth through demonstrating benevolence, abilities, and integrity
- Help improve the quality of their youth programs through increasing opportunities for youth and staff to interact on projects, build meaningful support, and develop authentic relationships

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate Service families on building trust with their youth
- Provide programs for youth that have low youth-to-staff ratios to increase opportunities for interaction and trust

### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend continuing to expand youth programs on military installations that demonstrate positive youth trust in leaders
- Encourage collaboration between DoD programs and community organizations that provide programs for military youth to help improve their youth-leader relationship quality

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## METHODS

- Participants were recruited from 13 Pathways Project youth development programs in Central Illinois, Chicago, and Minneapolis- St. Paul.
- Each group of 6-12 participants from each program were purposely selected to represent age, ethnicity, and participation length for the populations of each program.
- Data were gathered by interviewers asking youth to identify a leader they trusted the most in the program, then prompted to discuss how this trust developed.
- Data analysis started with identifying categories of leader behavior that led to growth of trust, then to describing the growth of trust over time, and finally applying theory and previous research to clarify the process.

## PARTICIPANTS

- There were 108 adolescents recruited from the study locations. Ninety-eight participants provided responses of sufficient quality to be included in the study.
- Participants were 12-19 years old (M = 15.7), with 92% being 14-17 years old. The races/ethnicities of participants were 43% Latino, 33% Black, 19% White, and 5% other ethnicities. Fifty-one percent identified as female.
- Participants had participated in the youth programs for 1.5 years on average at the start of the study.

## LIMITATIONS

- The study focused on high-quality programs but did not identify how they determined that the programs they selected were high quality.
- Ten participants were excluded from the data analysis for various reasons, but demographic information was provided only on the full sample, so it was unclear if the excluded participants impacted the demographic results, which can limit the generalizability of the study.
- It is unclear if the youth in these programs can be considered representative of all youth, as there was no comparison group.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Establish the processes that lead to youth mistrusting program leaders
- Investigate whether programs that are lower quality have similar or different rates of youth trust in leaders
- Utilize quantitative research methods to assess the influence each leader's action has on youth developing trust in leaders

## ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



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