

A conversation between world-renowned psychologist Paul Ekman and his daughter Eve, with Jason Marsh



Mary Ann Mason

What's it like to be raised by a leading expert on trust and deception? Psychologist Paul Ekman and his wife Mary Ann Mason (a professor and former dean at the University of California, Berkeley), have extended a great deal of trust to their now-28-year-old daughter, Eve.

GROWING UP IN SAN FRANCISCO, a city renowned for its hedonism, Eve Ekman faced more than her fair share of temptations, especially when she got involved in the local punk scene as a teenager. Like most adolescents, she felt the urge to do some things she knew her parents wouldn't approve of—go to clubs on weeknights, dabble with alcohol and marijuana—and which would require lying about where she was going and what she planned to do once she got there.

But unlike those other kids, Eve has a father who is one of the world's leading experts on detecting lies. Paul Ekman, a professor emeritus at the University of California, San Francisco, pioneered the scientific study of facial expressions and body language. For more than 50 years, his research has identified how emotions are subtly expressed through nonverbal

cues; for much of that time, he has devoted special attention to how and why people tell lies, and how others can catch those lies. His work has been used by police departments, teachers, and even the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In 2001, the American Psychological Association named Ekman one of the most influential psychologists of the 20th century.

It sounds like every kid's worst nightmare: the parent who always knows whether you're telling the truth. But when it came down to it, Paul Ekman's scientific expertise on lying was of limited usefulness to Paul Ekman the parent.

"I have been studying lying professionally for more than 20 years, but it was not easy to deal with it as a parent," he writes in his 1989 book, *Why Kids Lie: How Parents Can Encourage Truthfulness*, which includes

chapters by his wife, Mary Ann Mason, a professor and former dean at the University of California, Berkeley, and his son Tom, Eve's older brother. Indeed, as that book makes clear, it is one thing to be able to catch a kid in a lie; it's something very different to be able to raise a trustworthy child.

So how does an expert on lying, deception, and truthfulness try to foster trust and trustworthiness? Paul and Eve, who is now 28, recently sat down with *Greater Good's* editor in chief, Jason Marsh, to discuss the benefits of trusting your kids (even when it's nerve-wracking to do so), how to encourage trustworthy behavior, and what it takes to build trust between parents and children.

Eve Ekman: Do you ever remember catching me for anything when I broke your trust, or a time you caught me dead in a lie?

Paul Ekman: Nope. When I suspected that you had done something wrong, I went to some length to avoid putting you in a position where you would have to lie. Instead, when I was worried about you, I would ask leading questions like, “Is there something on your mind? Is there something you want to talk about?”

In that way, you had the opportunity to disclose on your own. I did not want to ask you every day if you had gotten into trouble, but there was a rule of disclosure. There were very few things I expected, but if you did not tell me, it was a lie.

I remember once, when I had heard you come in after curfew, I asked you, “What happened the other night? I heard you come in late.” So I was already telling you, “I know you did that,” without trying to catch you in a lie.

The issue clearly arises in every generation. I lied to my parents all the time. They were very restrictive, invading my privacy continuously. The challenge of my adolescence was learning how to outwit them, which I did. I had an entirely secret life.

Eve: So you are saying it is the nature of the relationship with the child that determines the role of trust and lying?

Paul: Yes, certainly so. The role of the parent is an extremely difficult one because you have to keep moving backwards. When parents start out, they are completely responsible for their child, who is totally helpless. As that child grows, you have to roll back, you have to grant control; otherwise, your child can't grow. You have to be able to live with the fact that as you grant the child more autonomy, they will get into all sorts of trouble. But you ultimately have to leave it up to them.

Jason Marsh: It seems like this could be difficult advice to follow, to trust that much. What was it from your research, or personal experience, that motivated you to take this approach?

Paul: It wasn't based on research, mine or anyone else's. It was based on my own experience with parents who did just the opposite. They did everything they could to try to interfere with my life, and they were the last people I would have ever turned to when I was a child. I wanted to be the first person my kids would turn to.

It took some restraint, because worry was my middle name, way before I ever had a child. But I think, for children, the most important thing is to feel they can trust that their parents, whether they approve or disapprove, will always be available for help and support. If that's not the case, then I think you've really failed as a parent.

LIFE STAGES OF TRUST

Infancy

Learning how to trust begins at birth: Babies are born completely dependent on caregivers to fulfill their basic needs for food, shelter, comfort and love. If caregivers react to babies' cries and body language in an attentive, consistent, and nurturing manner, those babies will feel safe and learn to trust their world, says researcher Danielle Kassow at Thrive By 5 Washington, which champions early learning opportunities for children up to age five. “The parent's first social relationship,” says Kassow, “is that he can communicate in or transfer to forming relationships.”



Eve Ekman as an infant, with her parents.

“If you are not trusted, it makes all intimate relationships impossible.”

Jason Marsh: Eve, what kind of effect do you think this kind of parenting style had on your behavior growing up, and on your feelings of trust toward your parents?

Eve: I was not your conventional good girl. But I definitely did not want to disappoint the trust they gave me, because I thought they were cool, and I liked them. They weren't just authority figures; they were very open and available and accessible. And if I challenged what they did, they would explain it to me. It wasn't like, “Because I said so.” There was always an explanation of why, and I guess that helped build trust. I always felt like, even in the worst case scenarios, they would be the first people I would call. Still, to this day, I call them first when I have trouble.

Paul: I remember the call from jail.

Eve: That was when I was arrested for protesting the war in Iraq.

Jason Marsh: Paul, do you think that by being so trusting, you not only earned the trust of your kids but also actually helped make them more trustworthy?

Paul: Yes. I didn't want them to get started on my path of lying to my parents. Because I do believe that it's a slippery slope: You start lying once, you lie another time, you lie about more things, and you've crossed the threshold. And I didn't want to put them in a position where they would cross that threshold.

Eve: What kinds of difficulties do parents encounter even when they want to put this kind of trust in their kids?

Paul: A major difficulty is that so much changes from generation to generation. What was normative in one generation can shift greatly—changing sexual morality, recreational drugs. Parents have a hard time trusting that their kids are prepared to deal with these things that are so new to the parents.

Beyond that, there is the difficulty of giving up control. Many parents are control freaks, and that is in part because they do not want to worry. And in ways they are right to worry—adolescents take risks that are very dangerous.

Eve: But it starts before adolescence, right?

Paul: It starts at three to five years of age, and it gets really strong in adolescence.

The Ekman family in 1986: Paul, Eve (at six years old), Mary Ann Mason, and Tom.

LIFE STAGES OF TRUST

Childhood

From an early age, children begin to differentiate between people who are trustworthy and those who aren't. In an experiment conducted by researchers Melissa Koenig and Paul Harris, three- and four-year-old children were confronted with adults who presented conflicting names for objects the children had never seen before. Some of these names were accurate; others were not. The four year olds could tell the accurate adults from the ones who were making names up, and later sought out the truthful adults, identifying them as trustworthy to the researchers.

In other research, Ken Rotenberg of Keele University in the United Kingdom has found that children develop trust in response to specific interactions they have with others; it is not something they apply universally. "Trust is dyadic and reciprocal, and children must learn unique patterns of trusting for each person they encounter," says Rotenberg. "Being too trusting can be a deficit." Instead of encouraging blind trust in children, Rotenberg argues that parents should focus on raising children who are worthy of trust. "Kids who are trustworthy have more friends and are better adjusted in school," he says. —JS



Ekman family photo

The Dalai Lama asked me once, "What is destructive compassion?" And I said that destructive compassion is when you are so worried about your child that you over-control them.

Since I work in this area and think about this area, I try to be very explicit and never put anyone in the position where they feel they have to lie to me. If they think that I am going to be a strict disciplinarian, that will change the relationship as well. The major research I have done shows that the main reason people lie is to avoid being punished.

Jason Marsh: But it seems that a lot of parents feel caught in a Catch-22. They may understand why it's important to trust their kids, but they may not feel that their kid is worthy of that trust. What can parents do to help encourage the kind of truthfulness in their kids that makes them more comfortable trusting those kids?

Paul: They can do things all the time—over the dining room table, with stories, when they're playing Chutes and Ladders and kids get tempted to cheat in the game. I really think up to the age of 10 or 11, children are zealots for the truth—they really don't want to mislead or be mislead. So you can build on that.

"I really think up to the age of 10 or 11, children are zealots for the truth."

You can do it by example. When Eve was born, I quit smoking after I had smoked for 30 years. And I also decided I was going to try to see if I could lead my life without lying to anyone about anything. It was much harder to do that—to figure out ways to be truthful without being harmful or insulting, to stay polite but be truthful. And it became a real challenge. But I also thought, "I'm going to try to do this because that's the example I want to be showing." I want my kids to see that there's a way to be truthful. It was very deliberate.

Parents also need to establish the rules of disclosure and the obligations that come with their trust. For instance, we always made very clear to both of our kids that if they got into trouble in school, they were obliged to tell us. So if they didn't tell us, then they were lying to us. That meant

we had to define "trouble." Trouble meant they were held after school, or called to the principal's office. That's a rule of disclosure.

We need to spell out these rules and obligations in any relationship. In the business world, do you have to tell your employer if you're looking for another job? Does your employer need to tell you if they're thinking of cutting your position? What are the rules of disclosure? They're never revealed. They're kept ambiguous. That just makes for a lot of distrust and bad work relationships. Same in marriages. I have one colleague who told me, "My rule is that anything I do out of town is OK." I said, "Does your spouse know that?" He never felt he needed to tell his spouse about it. There was no disclosure. It's just the basis for misunderstanding and distrust.

Jason Marsh: Eve, do you think that growing up with those rules has affected your relationships with others, outside of your family?

Eve: It's funny because as my dad was speaking, I was thinking about how I really do respect authority. Even though I think I'm a dissenter at heart, I definitely respect authority. You know, I'm afraid of getting caught, and that helps me not do things wrong. I was arrested once, but that was

simply because I was protesting. Other than that, I've never broken the law. I've only gotten one ticket.

In general, I hope that when punishment is exacted, it's fair and just, and I do think that was modeled to me from my family relationships. I think if there's an inconsistent message, I could imagine feeling like, "Well, those laws don't apply to me."

And in my personal relationships with friends, as well as romantic relationships, I definitely think trust is core. I definitely know I'm someone people depend on. I'm a social worker, that's my profession, but I also feel I'm the person who people call when things are really hard and they need someone they can trust. And I feel really respectful of that role, and I appreciate it.

I think you experience people's family life through how they interact with you, and I feel like I've been the beneficiary of a great deal of trust, and I myself am trusting. But I've been burned. I remember talking with my dad about it at one point, like, "Why do I feel disappointed? I feel like I'm trusting, and I'm not sure that's always met." Like, in my early 20s, when I first started to have really meaningful and important relationships outside of family, I found there were some people for whom family wasn't a model of trust and for whom learning trust was new. And so they would maybe play people off each other, do those kinds of things that ultimately will burn you.

Jason Marsh: So Paul, when you hear Eve talk about her ability to trust others and instill trust in others toward her, I wonder if you could step back and, putting on your psychologist's hat, draw on some research to explain why that may be. How might the particular parenting style that you've practiced foster that trustworthiness over time? And perhaps even more importantly, what could be the negative consequences of not fostering that sense of trust and trustworthiness?

Paul: There are a lot of clinical reports of people who are commitment adverse and can't trust others. Based on their reports of their childhood, it seems that this is often a result of how they were brought up. They found they couldn't trust their parents because their parents broke their promises or their commitments. And unreliability can be very damaging.

When I was 13, I spent five weeks rehearsing to play a role in a Gilbert & Sullivan show, *The Mikado*, for one performance, which my parents missed by two hours. I never forgave them for that. That was very decisive for me, that unreliability. Something like that

can make it quite a struggle for you to trust others. Quite a struggle.

But there's been much less scientific attention given to the positive side: What does positive parental behavior that earns trust look like? What are its benefits? Psychologists study problems; we don't study success. But I would expect just the reverse—that people who were trusting as children grow up being able to be trustworthy.

Jason Marsh: Some parents might try to earn their kids' trust, but they might not exhibit trust toward their kids in return.

What could be the consequences of not demonstrating trust toward your kids?

Paul: You have children who are either crippled by the over-controlling, micro-managing parent, or who become devious in order to get their freedom. They've got to grow, and they are increasingly capable of acting independently. So they're going to find a way to do so, or you're going to destroy them.

If they find a way to gain autonomy through deviousness, through gaming the system, that's really a bad way to learn



Ekman family photo

The Ekmans in 1997, when Eve was 17.

LIFE STAGES OF TRUST

Adolescence

In their teens, kids learn to take on new roles and develop a solid, consistent self-image. As they seek greater independence from their parents, they are more susceptible to pressure from friends, and may begin experimenting with risky behaviors like alcohol and drug use. Parents may try to limit their children's autonomy in an attempt to protect them, but experts say this can cause teens to become withdrawn or hide their activities from their parents, further weakening trust bonds.

According to child psychologist Russell Barkley, parents need to avoid this cycle of mistrust by communicating expectations for their teens in a clear, consistent manner, then following through with appropriate consequences. "Trust must be earned," says Barkley. "Parents need to do spot checks on their teens' activities, to make sure they are doing what they said they would do. If they are, they should be rewarded with more autonomy; if not, there needs to be appropriate punishment." Barkley believes that calm, consistent parenting creates an atmosphere of respect and trust in the family. "Teens count on their parents to be there for them," he says, "even when setting up disciplinary consequences." —JS

LIFE STAGES OF TRUST

Adulthood

In young adulthood, developing bonds of intimacy becomes paramount. We form intimate bonds by learning how to trust another person to treat us fairly and protect our emotional safety.

According to psychologist Joshua Coleman, the capacity to develop intimacy is highly influenced by what kind of relationships you had early in life. “Parents who are largely loving, interested, and caring toward their children will make it easier for those children to develop intimate bonds later in life,” says Coleman, whose essay on betrayals of trust appears on page 26. “But if the parents were rejecting, the children may carry a sense of shame and inadequacy into their adult relationships.”

Still, says Coleman, it’s not all about parental relationships. Other relationships can influence trust, too. “Trust is about transparency, about learning that it’s safe to let another person know who you are and what you feel, and it’s basically trial and error,” he says. “You pay attention to your instincts about whom to trust, and you try it out.” —JS



independence because once you learn how to deceive your parents, there’s a lot of temptation to do it with everybody else. That brings short-term gains and long-term losses. But if you’re the type who just goes from one relationship to another, then you may never realize what you’re losing—until you get late in your life and you feel you haven’t built anything.

Jason Marsh: Based on research and your own experience, is it possible for you to sum up what you believe is most important to raising kids who are both trusting and trustworthy?

Paul: The two are related. People who are distrustful are usually not very trustworthy themselves, and difficult to deal with.

You have a fundamental choice to make about how you’re going to lead your life: Are you going to be suspicious and risk disbelieving people who are truthful? Or are you going to be trusting and risk being misled? As a parent, you always need to be trusting and risk being misled. Being wrongly accused is terrible. And it is less pleasant to live your life being suspicious all the time, unless you are a police investigator. And you do not need to be an investigator in your home.

As a parent, you always need to be trusting and risk being misled.

Eve: Is there such a thing as too much trust?

Paul: No.

Eve: Really? Even when your kids are lying to you, and you know they’re lying to you?

Paul: There is no general rule.

Eve: I imagine people who read your book *Why Kids Lie* would want to be able to better catch their kids in lies.

Paul: But that absolutely was not my intention; my intention was to explain to parents why kids lie, not how to catch them in lies. There is nothing in the book that teaches how to detect lies. That is not your job as a parent to be the cop, to be the interrogator. You must be the teacher, or the model. You want to talk to your kids about the real costs of lying. The real cost is not being trusted. If you are not trusted, it makes all intimate relationships impossible.

Eve: I did trust you and always felt you had my best intentions in mind. I sometimes felt that I knew how to take care of myself more than you could give me credit for, but I think that is a pretty natural part of growing up and wanting full freedom.

To this day, I think that trust is present in my everyday thinking. When I am making a hard or risky decision, I think, “What would my parents think?”

Paul: Having had parents who made every mistake you could make—they were good models of what not to do.

Eve: So, do you trust me?

Paul: Of course.

Eve Ekman, MSW, is a San Francisco-based social worker, writer, artist, and editor of the interdisciplinary magazine *Eth6: Social Work, Journalism, and Art from the Invisible City* (www.ethsix.com). **Paul Ekman, Ph.D.**, is the world’s foremost expert on facial expressions and a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of California Medical School in San Francisco. He is the author of 15 books, including, most recently, *Emotional Awareness*, a conversation between himself and the Dalai Lama (reviewed on page 46). He is also a member of *Greater Good’s* editorial board.