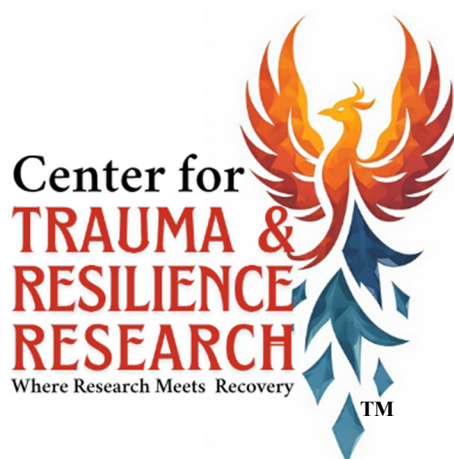


How Does One Develop Trust If They Have Never Learned It?

Dr. Margaret (Meg) Robertson

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(541)630-3888; FAX: (360) 251-0821

Website: www.ctrinc.com

Nonsecure email: trauma.resilience.research@gmail.com

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Abstract

Trust is a foundational psychological and relational capacity that supports emotional regulation, learning, intimacy, and social participation. Yet for many individuals, trust was never reliably learned due to early relational trauma, neglect, institutional betrayal, or chronic unpredictability. This paper examines how trust can be developed later in life when its foundational conditions were absent in childhood. Drawing on attachment theory, affective neuroscience, epistemic trust research, and trauma-informed relational models, this essay argues that trust is not a fixed trait but a developmental process that can be re-learned through embodied safety, emotional attunement, repeated relational repair, and meaning-making. The paper outlines key mechanisms through which trust emerges across the lifespan, including bodily self-trust, emotional regulation, epistemic openness, and moral repair, and highlights clinical and relational implications for individuals and systems working with populations who have never known trust as safe or reliable.

Keywords: trust development, attachment trauma, epistemic trust, emotion regulation, embodied safety, relational repair

How Does One Develop Trust If They Have Never Learned It?

Trust is often assumed to be a natural byproduct of healthy development, yet for many individuals it is a capacity that never reliably formed. Experiences of early attachment disruption, abuse, neglect, systemic betrayal, or chronic instability profoundly shape expectations about others, the self, and the world (Bowlby, 1988; Bessant et al., 2016). When trust has never been learned, individuals may appear guarded, hypervigilant, emotionally dysregulated, or relationally avoidant—not because they refuse trust, but because trust has never been safe.

The question, then, is not simply how trust is restored after rupture, but how trust can be developed when it was never developmentally encoded. Contemporary research across psychology, neuroscience, and social systems increasingly converges on the understanding that trust is a learned, embodied, relational process, not merely a cognitive decision (Ainsworth, 2015; Farolfi et al., 2021; Porges, 2011). This paper explores how trust can be cultivated across the lifespan for individuals who did not learn it early, emphasizing developmental pathways that involve bodily safety, emotional literacy, epistemic openness, and relational consistency.

Trust as a Developmental Capacity

Attachment theory provides the earliest and most robust framework for understanding trust development. Secure attachment emerges when caregivers are consistently responsive, emotionally attuned, and predictable, allowing the child to internalize a sense of safety and relational reliability (Ainsworth, 2015; Bowlby, 1988). When these conditions are absent, individuals may develop insecure or disorganized attachment patterns that impair trust formation well into adulthood (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Importantly, attachment research demonstrates that trust is not lost once and for all if early conditions were adverse. Rather, trust remains developmentally plastic, capable of being reshaped through later corrective experiences (Rotenberg, 2010; Reiter et al., 2023). Trust formation across adolescence and adulthood has been shown to depend on repeated experiences of promise fulfillment, emotional attunement, and relational repair (Fikrlová et al., 2025; Shen et al., 2025).

Embodied Foundations of Trust

For individuals who never learned trust, the first site of repair is often not interpersonal but embodied. Research consistently shows that trauma disrupts interoception—the ability to accurately perceive and trust internal bodily signals—leading to alienation from one’s own sensations, emotions, and needs (Van der Kolk, 2020; Brown et al., 2021). When the body itself does not feel safe or reliable, trusting others becomes neurologically improbable.

Polyvagal theory helps explain this process, emphasizing that trust emerges when the nervous system experiences cues of safety rather than threat (Porges, 2011). Trust is therefore not merely a belief but a physiological state. Studies on body trust and emotional regulation demonstrate that individuals who develop greater awareness and tolerance of bodily sensations show increased relational openness and reduced defensive responses (Brown et al., 2021; Stafford et al., 2024).

Thus, learning trust often begins with learning to inhabit the body safely—through breath, movement, emotional awareness, and regulation—before relational trust can meaningfully develop (Aas, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2020).

Emotional Attunement and the Relearning of Safety

Emotion plays a central role in trust formation across relational contexts. Trust develops not through abstract assurances, but through repeated experiences of emotional acknowledgment,

validation, and repair (Gottman, 2011; Yu et al., 2021). Individuals who never learned trust often learned instead that emotions were ignored, punished, or exploited, resulting in emotional suppression or volatility (Frevert, 2014; Sweeney, 2023).

Research on emotional intelligence and relational trust demonstrates that the consistent naming, validation, and containment of emotions fosters trust even in previously mistrustful individuals (Aguilar, 2016; Glaser, 2016; Harvard Business Review, 2024). In therapeutic and relational contexts, emotional attunement functions as a corrective emotional experience, gradually reshaping expectations about safety and responsiveness (Christopher et al., 2025).

Crucially, trust develops not through perfection, but through repair. Studies of moral and relational repair emphasize that acknowledging harm, taking responsibility, and restoring dignity are foundational to rebuilding trust where it never existed (Walker, 2006; Kidwell & Kerig, 2023).

Epistemic Trust and Learning From Others

Beyond emotional safety, trust involves epistemic openness—the willingness to accept information from others as relevant and reliable. Research on epistemic trust shows that individuals exposed to chronic betrayal or unpredictability develop heightened epistemic vigilance, making them resistant to learning from social sources (Bortolan, 2024; Talia et al., 2024).

Epistemic trust develops when individuals experience others as both benevolent and competent, and when information is delivered in emotionally regulated, respectful ways (Andrews, 2019; Lee et al., 2023). Developmental studies indicate that even individuals with significant early adversity can regain epistemic trust when relational contexts are consistent, transparent, and emotionally attuned (Brown & Gummerum, 2025; Geng et al., 2025).

Thus, learning trust later in life involves not only learning to feel safe with others, but learning that others can be meaningful sources of truth rather than threat.

Repetition, Predictability, and Time

Trust does not emerge through insight alone. Longitudinal research consistently demonstrates that trust is built through time, repetition, and predictability (Mayer et al., 1995; Covey & Merrill, 2008). For individuals who never learned trust, this process is often slower and nonlinear, requiring many low-stakes experiences of reliability before higher levels of vulnerability are possible.

This aligns with findings that trust gains during adolescence and adulthood are attenuated—but not absent—in individuals with early adversity (Reiter et al., 2023). Trust develops incrementally as expectations shift through repeated confirmation that safety, care, and accountability are possible.

Clinical and Relational Implications

Understanding trust as a developmental, embodied, and relational process has profound implications for therapy, education, leadership, and caregiving systems. Trust cannot be demanded, accelerated, or coerced; it must be earned through consistent relational behavior (O'Neill, 2002; Postholm, 2025).

For clinicians and helpers, this means prioritizing safety, transparency, emotional attunement, and repair over insight or compliance. For individuals who never learned trust, healing often involves learning first to trust their own body, emotions, and perceptions before relational trust becomes possible (Alyce et al., 2025; Van der Kolk, 2020).

Conclusion

If trust was never learned, it must be developed—not assumed. Trust emerges through embodied safety, emotional attunement, epistemic openness, and repeated relational repair across time. Research across attachment theory, neuroscience, and social psychology converges on a hopeful conclusion: trust is not a fixed trait determined by early life alone, but a capacity that can be cultivated through consistent, attuned, and humane relationships. For those who have never known trust, learning it is not a failure of character—it is an act of profound developmental courage.

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