

Trust the Process



Trust the Process is a phrase we use often at Woodhall, and my understanding of what it means has deepened over time. In my first year, a parent asked for a PowerPoint explaining the phrase. Others have asked about the “secret sauce” and how to replicate it outside of Woodhall.

The process consists of many interconnected components. These include using affective language; identifying root causes rather than reacting to surface behaviors; repeatedly asking young men to access and articulate their feelings; developing genuine relationships so that hard conversations are possible; creating an environment where students can succeed and safely experience failure; and taking the time to truly understand each student’s developmental needs. Every student is on their own journey, so the timeline and appearance of growth will look different for each individual. Trusting the Process means trusting the adult mentors at Woodhall to know when to push a student, when to prioritize the relationship, and when to let something go and return to it later.

CONTINUES >>

For those seeking a more data-driven explanation, Woodhall uses Restorative Practices, which are grounded in research on shame, guilt, community, support, setbacks, and the impact of language, question phrasing, and feedback. The Communications Program is Woodhall's application of Restorative Practices. We focus on establishing what a healthy community looks like, sounds like, and feels like so that when someone deviates from those norms, they understand what they are restoring back to. At Woodhall, we intentionally use language that does not stigmatize shame but instead breaks it down so students can reintegrate into the community. Rather than labeling a student as a liar, we describe a pattern of dishonesty. This distinction reinforces that each choice is just that—a choice—and that behavior is not fixed or predetermined.

Recently, while listening to Brené Brown discuss vulnerability, I was struck by her explanation of how qualitative research can become quantitative. This resonated with me, as my academic background emphasized quantitative research despite valuing qualitative insights. As I listened, many aspects of Woodhall came to mind. While each student and family is unique, the experiences and outcomes we see follow recognizable patterns. This is also part of what we mean by Trust the Process. We ask families to trust that the adults at Woodhall have walked this road before. We get to know each individual deeply, and we use patterns—developed through experience, professional development, and research—to help navigate familiar challenges while meeting students where they are.

Another important aspect of the process is understanding that we are not our students' families. Part of trusting the process is allowing Woodhall adults and students to have difficult conversations and address disruptive or hurtful behaviors. This can free families to focus on connection, shared experiences, and rebuilding relationships. Trusting a school—especially when past educational experiences may have fallen short—is understandably difficult. We recognize that trust must be earned and that it requires vulnerability.

Vulnerability is not typically encouraged in young men, and many have a limited emotional vocabulary. When the skill of expressing feelings is not developed, students often move through life less connected to themselves and others. At Woodhall, we normalize emotions and vulnerability. Students are encouraged to share their own experiences when a peer is struggling, which helps transform shame into guilt. Brené Brown talks about shame as believing “I am bad,” while guilt is believing “I did something bad.” In Restorative Practices, this is called Separating the Deed from the Doer, and Carol Dweck would discuss it as “Not Yet,” based on her research on growth mindset versus fixed mindset. Throughout the day, students are frequently asked, “How does that make you feel?” While this can be uncomfortable at first, the repetition helps it become second nature. Many students who begin skeptical of the Communications Program later apply for Student Leadership and reflect on how they came to understand the value of affective communication and taking the time to hear and understand other perspectives.

Ultimately, Trusting the Process means asking families to believe that Woodhall is different. We intentionally create spaces where students can safely explore shame, transform it into guilt, and practice appropriate vulnerability. Our goal is for students and families to leave Woodhall with a toolbox of skills they can apply in college, the workplace, and beyond.

Yours with integrity, compassion, and respect,

Sasha Skulsky
Assistant Head of School