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OFFER EXPIRES MARCH 1, 2021

Dear Dr. Allen:

Who influences your kids?

by Dr. Greg Allen

We used to look up to role models in our culture. They were movie stars, athletes, politicians, writers, professors, and business leaders. Over time many of these role models have turned out to be not good examples of how we should lead our lives and have lost the attractive power they once had over us.

What about parents? Most would conclude that early in life, parents are the major influencer in their kids' lives. Certainly, 8-year-olds want to copy and please their parents. As kids become teens, they begin to individuate and a parent can feel insignificant in terms of their teens' interests or as a guide for life.

Teens begin to shift their priority to peers; they start discovering other ways of thinking about life and allow other adults to influence them, including social media influencers.

Many teens give up the family values they grew up with after leaving home and going to college. Often it's a temporary change that lasts until the mid 20s or later when they get married and have kids. The young adult then begins to appreciate their parents' efforts, raising them and sacrificing for them their whole lives.

Your values, beliefs, preferences, habits, and DNA will begin to emerge in them and their lives.

We need to realize that our kids understand us more than we realize. A 10-year-old can tell you your values, beliefs, and what you would do in a given situation. They can recite what you believe about an issue and why. Most kids can even tell you what you would tell them regarding a situation they might encounter. They have already been imprinted with our values and beliefs. Thus, we need to switch our parenting from repeating the same thing we have been saying their whole life and begin to seek to hear them think and speak their own thoughts and reasonings.

Brainstorming: A good way to look at our conversations with pre-teens and teens is as brainstorming strategies. You need uninterrupted time in which together you can brainstorm ideas, such as pros and cons of values and rules, why there is a rule or expectation in the family system or in society. Initially, the focus of your brainstorming can be your family values and if the conversation is successful broaden it to community issues that exist.

Parents will have to be patient and back off on the goal of convincing your kid that your way is the only and best way or that they need to think like you about something. This may be a huge challenge for a parent. But over time, with patience and practice, it can happen. Our goal as a parent is to begin to hear our child/teen reason, contemplate, explain, consider, ponder, and reflect on ideas and values.

This brainstorming will allow our teens to develop the ability to go deeper within themselves. They can gain a stable foundation to rest upon with confidence and to draw from in times of difficulty.

You may not believe this, but parents are still the number1 influencer in their kids' lives, even through the teens years. Yes, teens may be totally different in many ways from their parents, but allowing them the ability to think creatively, consider all angles of a viewpoint, pros and cons of issues, how they are influenced by and influence others will allow them to become a considerate and wise person. Our goal is for the best in them to emerge as they go through the teen years and become young adults.

Dr. Greg Allen is a Licensed Therapist practicing in Palos Verdes Estates. (drgregallen.com). He is also the founder and director of Freedom4U, a non-profit that seeks to guide youth towards their life purpose and thereby reduce risky lifestyles. (freedomcommunity.com). His new non-profit Hearts Respond, will focus on supporting LA Harbor families in social-emotional areas. (heartsrespond.com). PEN