

Teaching the Way of Love

Volume 11 | Issue 2 | October 2021



Who Has the Greatest Influence On Your Children?

My wife and I have entered into a new phase of parenting. Both of our children are now high school students. Even though it's early in the year, our son and our daughter have each begun to express their independence in various ways. Our daughter is the thoughtful one, enjoying questions and debate. Our son is more straightforwardly rebellious, rejecting his family's beliefs and values outright and finding it more comfortable to conform to his friends and culture.

In both cases - but especially in the case of our son - my wife and I have faced the temptation to give up. After all, we have already done our best to pass on our Faith to our children, to teach them to value the truth, and to encourage them to become good people. We did our job, right?



When our children were young, they loved to imitate us. They believed everything we told them (even if it was outlandish). Our influence on them was clear and obvious. But as children get older and begin to exercise their free will, parental confidence can be shaken. It's natural for teenagers to reject the teachings of their parents, isn't it? The last thing our kids want to hear is nagging from us. Let's just give it a rest and let our children make their own choices. Teenagers are more influenced by their friends anyway. They've stopped listening to us. They are listening to the loud, influential voices that challenge all that we taught them. It sure can seem like parents lose their influence as our children get older. Do we have any influence at all?

Actually, studies show that we do. Even into adulthood, children continue to listen to and value their parents' input on their lives. These studies have led to public service announcements urging parents to talk to their kids about drugs, suicide, and bullying. Children listen, even when they don't seem to be.

The Church recognizes the vital role that parents play by calling parents the "primary educators" of their children. This title indicates that parents offer children their first lessons in loving God, loving neighbor, and embracing truth, goodness, and beauty. Parents lay the foundation upon which children will build their life experiences and form their free will.

But there is a catch. Parents can't give up. Parents need to continue **striving** to be influential in their children's lives. We can't give up. One of the best ways to continue having an influence on your children is through dialogue.

In my experience as a parent and a teacher, dialogue works much better than lectures. As I said, my daughter loves to question and debate, so that's pretty easy with her. The challenge with her is that I really have to know my stuff or at least be willing to learn along with her. I can't expect her to believe what I say just because I say it. With my more reticent son, the challenge lies in getting him to talk in the first place. My discussions with him usually center around me asking him questions to challenge the assumptions he brings home. He's not usually interested in debate, but I find that consistently asking him good questions can at least make him think so he doesn't automatically swallow the ideas he picks up from his friends and the culture.

Another important way for parents to be the primary educators of their children is through their example. If your children see that you seek truth, appreciate beauty, and strive for goodness, they are more likely to see the importance of transcendent goods that lead to God. If your children see you making efforts to love and serve others selflessly, they will be more likely to seek out ways to do the same as they become adults. If your children see you loving God through prayer and Sacrament, they are more likely to see a relationship with God as important in their adult lives.

What has the greatest influence on your children? Are their friends and culture having a greater impact on them than you are? Have you given up your role as the primary educator of your children? If so, how can you reclaim your rightful place in their lives? How can you become the primary influence on them? It can be difficult, especially as your children get older. But it's worth the effort. You can't control your children's free will. But you can remain influential.



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