

Parental Influence: "We'll be along...directly."

by Terry Olson

Often parents must choose between being influential in their children's lives or being in control.

I don't know how many regions of the U.S. use the phrase, "We'll be along directly." The phrase suggests people are on their way—will be leaving shortly—to visit Aunt Geneva or to participate in the potluck supper. The phrase usually does not mean, "We'll be there in ten minutes," or, "We won't be late." To be along directly suggests a nonchalance about the arrival time. This is not to be confused with being lackadaisical. The travelers who will be along directly are committed to coming. Their loyalty or love is not in question. But the insistence on timetables is absent. It is as if the visitors actually will be along indirectly. Sometimes indirect arrivals are more valuable than direct ones. The journey is more remembered; the potluck dinner more tasty. To be along directly is to value the relationship, but not be rigid about the time. This relates to matters of control and influence. Even indirect influence can be more beneficial than direct attempts to control. Sometimes it is wise for parents who wish to influence their children to do so indirectly.

Parents wish to be of influence with their children. And children often resist parental attempts to control them. Parents are often blind to the fact that they must choose between being influential or being in control. Often, to be in control is also to abandon the opportunity to influence. "Controllers" don't allow their guests to "be along directly." They want them there NOW. Such an attitude can affect the flavor of the pie being served once those who are coming directly do, in fact, arrive. For if the arrival time is more important than the relationship, the atmosphere for the evening feels as if the cordiality and humanity of the dinner has been sucked out in advance.

Cory Hunt had begun to sneak out of the house after midnight to "hang out" with a questionable motorcycle group that virtually haunted a park three blocks from his home. Given that Cory was twelve, his parents were more than concerned. Direct commands to desist, late night parental patrols, removal of privileges, and grounding Cory failed. The family finally installed a burglar alarm on Cory's means of moonlight escape, his bedroom window. It took Cory two nights before he figured a way to jump the alarm and escape through the window without tripping the alarm (always creative, those Hunt kids). Moreover, as the family investigated Cory's escape route across the roof, they discovered the marijuana plants he was growing. At this point, the family invited me to solve the problem.

I discovered a family extensively involved in community, school, and social events, but not with each other. Dan, in college, was on the gymnastics team (the family had never seen him perform); Darla, his sister, was on the high school swim team (mother had been to one meet). Mrs. Hunt was an accomplished musician seeking to move from volunteer to paid status with the city symphony (Cory had never been to her concerts) and Mr. Hunt, a surgeon, had a schedule that made him a phantom at home. Cory, at twelve, was the youngest, and five years younger than Darla.

Some obvious realities for Cory emerged as I asked the family when they could gather together for a meeting with me. First, was the disbelief that they had to come to a meeting at all. Second, was the direct order to me from the father that I do what they called me in to do, which was to "fix Cory's motor." The approach to life that helped the father be successful as a surgeon (get in clearly and carefully, excise the offending tissue, and get out) was being applied to his son's difficulties, but inappropriately. I was to excise the offending behavior and return Cory to the family fully recovered.

Here was a classic example of parents, with all good intentions, substituting control for influence. In their minds, the control mechanisms (their direct orders and punishments) had failed, so, from inside their world, they had the good sense to call in an External Controller: me. My entry actually became an additional disappointment to them. I wanted to talk about relationships, about informal time together, about hiking the mountains east of the city. I wanted them on the La Luz trail to Sandia Peak and counting the mountain goats together. I wanted to set the stage for parents to share hopes, fears, beliefs, and dreams with Cory. I wanted to propose that Darla tutor Cory in the math class he was failing, and I thought there might be value in Mrs. Hunt giving Cory the responsibility to plan Mr. Hunt's surprise birthday party.

Alas, such ideas would require a willingness to relate to one another, to make leisure a time of family connectedness. Some features of my suggestions even included the idea that cooperation was more valuable than control. To a family used to using their house as a warm Bed and Breakfast place, these were strange ideas. I seemed to be missing the mark badly. Was I not trained to see that the problem was Cory? Could I not address the point of the problem?

I felt we could see eye to eye if they were willing to be along...directly. I wanted the family and Cory to see that for them control had become more fundamental than relationships, and that relationships built on control either do not last or consist of mutually miserable people. I did not feel it right to tell them they needed to turn their hearts to each other, but that was the message of my approach. I wanted a family who planned (together) events where they were together. A bike ride together is not a magic formula for change, but it is evidence that the relationship can be built on something other than "don't ever forget who is in charge here."

Influence is being the kind of person others are drawn to voluntarily. Control is a substitute we resort to when we have failed to be of influence. The general notion, of course, is that no power or influence can (or ought to be) maintained by virtue of being a parent, or being a surgeon, or having ego needs, etc. Doing nothing more or less than laughing together, may be a way of "being along directly." Take time, sow seeds, watch what blossoms.

Unfortunately, this family only saw my meaning as, "Oh, so you want us to things as group and include Cory so that we can change his behavior?" Alas, instead of abandoning control so they could be of influence, they brought their attitude of control with them. Only their mechanisms of control changed. Now they did not use threats, they used "time together." People were ordered to have fun. What fun they had.

Without a willingness to be along directly (to make their connections with each other the starting point of understanding), by not making an interest in each others' well-being their starting point, they just attempted to manipulate Cory in new ways. Outward behavior changed, hearts did not. The beginning of hope for them actually came when Cory left a note saying he was going to the La Luz trail with the neighborhood Scout troop. Mr. Hunt had not wanted Cory to go (it was too dangerous). To stop Cory, Mr. Hunt had to drive to the foot of the trail and try to catch up to the troop. It took him over an hour, and by then he and the troop were almost three miles up the trail. The welcome by the scoutmaster and the view and the recognition that Mr. Hunt could stay and watch Cory, contributed to his decision to continue with the troop to the top of the mountain. Mr. Hunt came along directly, and came to more of a beginning of influence than he understood. But the next three months of experience with Cory were transformed. Control became unnecessary. Love unfeigned on a mountain trail was just the starting point.