

Influence

Imagine two parenting presentations, both about maintaining influence over the decisions children make when they are away from parents. One developed for parents of preadolescents, the other for parents of older teenagers. And imagine them one week apart!

The high school talk was first. Parents wanted to know about influencing the decisions their teenagers are making on dates, at parties, and while driving with friends. Parents of younger children were worried about the bad words their children were learning on the bus, the opportunities to watch inappropriate shows at friends' houses, accessing inappropriate websites from a home computer, or learning about the facts of life from someone other than a parent. One parent got so worked up as she thought about these external influences that she asked: "How are we supposed to raise our children to have our family's values in this sea of garbage?"

Sea of garbage. What a wonderful phrase! Like the phrase from Lion King (hakuna matata), it stays with you for a while. But where the phrase from Lion King means no worries, this phrase might lead to constant worries. Without exception, all the parents attending both talks believed that there were unhelpful messages surrounding their children and hoped their children would grow into adulthood without being unduly influenced by this pervasive sea of garbage. It is extremely rare to see such unanimity about anything pertaining to parenting.

The critical parenting factor (and the reason for this article) became apparent to me by having these talks so close together. The high school parents were desperate for strategies they could use right now (today!), words they could use, arguments they could make, stories they could tell, that would help their teenagers resist alcohol and drugs, sexual activity and careless driving. The stakes are high and eventually our children make extremely important (even life or death) decisions when they are away from us. At times without our even knowing the garbage they are being exposed to. This is painfully plain to see once children are older.

What is painfully invisible to parents when their children are younger is that the sea of garbage that surrounds them during the earlier years may lead them to inadvertently parent in a way that weakens their influence during the later years. Imagine hearing a curse word from your second-grader and responding with horror. Or getting a phone call from a mother who learned that her daughter and your daughter watched an inappropriate show at a third friend's house. And not only that but when you confront your daughter, she lies to your face and denies it ever happened. How are you doing? What do you look like and sound like? Are you protecting the connection while you handle the unwelcome appearance of the sea of garbage?

Both talks concluded with this question: "Can the sea of garbage (elementary version) be used with an eye to the sea of garbage (high school version)?" Both groups of parents agreed. But as you can probably imagine the tone in the two rooms was quite different. Where the high school parents were looking over their shoulders with some regret, the elementary parents looked inspired. In fact, one mother said "I'm ready, bring it all on." With a long-term view, it is easy to see how the challenges during our children's younger years can be handled in a way that will strengthen the communication and the connection between parent and child. We state our values, we give consequences, discipline with reassurance, and continuously introduce and reintroduce ourselves as parents who they can talk to about everything.

While we do whatever we can to keep the sea from coming in (limits on TV watching, passwords and filters on computers, knowing our children's friends, etc.) we must at the same time be prepared for its inevitability. By doing so, we will be ready with the best words and the right tone that keep our children close to us. And we remember that as long as they talk with us about their experiences we will have influence over the decisions they make, now and in the future.

Dr. Steve Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. Please check www.drstevekahn.com for additional (free) articles about parenting or to learn more about the book, available both in paperback and as an audio book. Please feel free to share this article with others.