

# Families That Thrive

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

## Influence

Influence. When you see this word, what do you think of? We use the word *influence* in lots of ways. Some are positive: “She has been such a positive influence to her students.” Some are negative: “He was pulled over and arrested for driving under the influence.” Some are evocative: “What kind of influence do you want to have on your children? What kind of influence do you want your children to have on others?”

It is one of life’s most important variables. Influence isn’t everything, but it lies at the heart of our upbringing and our growth as human beings. Influence plays a huge role in raising children. It also plays an important part in our adult relationships.

Our daughter Jaime is quite skilled at influencing the rest of us when it comes to, say, choosing a restaurant. She might call me at the office and say, “Mom and I have been talking, and we’d like to go out to dinner tonight. We don’t want you to feel out of the loop, so we want you to choose the restaurant. We also want you to know that you are welcome to pay. Please don’t worry about asking us to pay. We promise you won’t hurt our feelings.” She will then give me two choices for the restaurant. One of the two will consist of a restaurant that Jaime knows that I don’t particularly like. The other will be the one she wants me to take the family to.

Here’s the deal: We both know what Jaime is doing. And we both know that we both know what she is doing. She is influencing me, and this is something in which I take great delight.

These kinds of efforts to influence me are fun, to be sure. We all laugh (most of the time, anyway). But there’s a deeper reason that I have always welcomed influence from Nancy, Jaime, and David. I have always wanted to have influence with them. I have always wanted them to take me seriously. I want them to welcome and ponder what I think. What we have learned as a family is that if I want to influence others, it is essential that I be under their influence as well. For genuine influence to be effective, a relationship has to have a lot of give and take. The back and forth flow between us needs, for the most part, to be easy and relaxed. No, it can’t be this way *all* of the time, but it can be most of the time.

If I am to have authentic influence with our family, they have to know that I welcome their influence as well. The more I welcome their influence, the more influence I have with them. This is because they know that I take them seriously. I frequently seek their input and counsel. Because I seek their counsel, they know that I trust them and that I regard what they think and feel as priceless. Moreover, I try to *act* on their influence. That way, they know that I take their influence seriously. What they think plays a huge part in my life.

Not only does this help me to become a better person, it helps me to influence them as well. They know that I am open to them. They know that my soul contains fertile soil for the words they have to sow in my life. I am actively open to them, and this opens them up to me as well. When I allow others to influence me, they know that they are safe and secure with me. I treasure everything about them. And just as I seek their influence, so do they seek mine.

I think that a high level of humility makes helpful influence possible. All of us have been around people who, by their own admission, know everything. They'll be the first to tell you. These kinds of people leave you feeling like they think they are God Almighty. They are self-righteous, self-serving, inflexible, arrogant, and condescending. They are quick to find fault with others, and they almost never seek the genuine influence of others. Because these kinds of people are impossible to influence, the only genuine influence they will have with others will involve people with a similar inflexible self-righteousness. The problem is that there is no give and take.

But when there is give and take, our relationships thrive. I am not suggesting that we become spineless pushovers. Nor am I suggesting that we give up our most important values, purposes, and principles. I am, however, talking about the way we interact. When we allow others to influence us, we have more influence with them. This is particularly true in relationships of intimacy. We not only grow as individuals, but we also grow together.

Can you imagine taking this risk: Would you consider approaching those whom you love and asking them, "Do you feel like I am open to your influence? What would it take for us to have a healthy influence with each other?"