

Influential *Parenting*

B. Kim Barnes

THE INFLUENCE GURU

The most fundamental organizational unit is the family — and it is where we first learn what power, choice, and influence actually mean.

The most fundamental organizational unit is the family. In our families, we learn to read nonverbal signals, to express thoughts, emotions, and ideas, to communicate one-to-one or one to many. Our parents and older siblings or cousins provide information and guidance about how to treat others within or outside of the family. They pass along norms, taboos, and values that help us make decisions and fit into the culture. We learn the small details about how things should be done. As we develop, we are shaped by all of these factors. If we ignore or overstep the boundaries that have been communicated to us, we are usually corrected. That early education in the family determines how we first understand power, choice, and influence. A child's later ability to lead, negotiate, and participate constructively in groups begins with the ways family members invite, resist, share, or deny influence at home.

Every family has a structure

As in any human organization, there are various structures and processes in families that simplify decision-making and provide safety and confidence. Some families operate as hierarchies with the parents — or, for some families, only one of the parents, usually the father — providing leadership, direction, solutions and support. In other two-parent families, both of them take that role, either dividing the leadership labor or coordinating with one another. Some families are more democratic in style, with children earning more decision-making authority for themselves as their capabilities grow and gradually participating more in decisions that affect others in the family.

In any family, regardless of type, members have ways of getting what they want. In hierarchical ones, the most successful approach is often indirect or even hidden, so as not to offend or anger the head of the household. Pleading, flattering, or otherwise manipulating are often the approaches that seem to work best — at least until the children are old enough to confront or compete with the “top dog.”

The coin of the realm

In the more democratic families, the coin of the realm is influence. Parents who intend to raise their children to be independent, to make their own choices and decisions, begin very early in a child's life to treat him or her as a rational being with preferences and efficacy. They present even very small children with choices to make about their own lives.

VERY EARLY, THE CHOICES ARE SMALL

- *Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the green one?*
- *Do you want Bunny to sleep with you tonight, or do you want to invite Fox?*
- *Do you want apple slices or bananas?*

Of course, they offer choices they can live with either way at first. Later on, they begin to ask more open-ended questions such as, "What would you like to wear today? Which friend do you want to invite to play this afternoon?" These questions communicate to the child that the parent respects their ability to decide. Thus, the parent who wants to raise an influential child must prepare to live with some interesting combinations of clothing or a social event the parent may not have preferred.

Not giving up parental authority

Raising healthy children does not mean giving up parental authority. It does mean that, unless there is immediate danger involved, you are willing to have a discussion with your child about decisions. You, the parent, are an experienced person with knowledge about the pros and cons of taking different actions. Your child will learn that as well, either as a result of taking those actions and experiencing the outcomes or by simply taking your word for it. The latter response is almost always temporary. We generally don't want our children to be fearful and reluctant to take intelligent risks that allow them to learn and grow.

Certainly, there are some areas where parents must assert their authority. "Don't step into the street without holding my hand." "You may not use that tool unless we are working together." "No TV after 8 o'clock." But many decisions, even those, can be discussed as a child matures. In that process, we as parents can learn to allow our children to influence us. We can make it clear what we are willing to be influenced about. We can move beyond simple this or that choices. We can model good influence behavior by using it to achieve our own objectives with our children.

MODELLING IT YOURSELF

- *I'd like you to choose one new job to complete as we clean the house today.*
- *Which book should we read together before you go to sleep tonight?*
- *How do you think we can store your toys to keep them off the floor?*

Expressive and receptive

Influence behavior can be **expressive** — sending a message about what you want, think, hope, intend, envision — then inviting them to join you or take an action you would like them to take. Or it can be **receptive** — listening, drawing information and ideas from your child, encouraging them to participate in decisions with you. A balance of both sending and receiving behaviors expresses interest in and respect for your child's needs, opinions, and ideas. And sometimes taking a break is helpful, especially when emotions (yours or theirs) are getting in the way of productive discussion. "Let's talk about it this afternoon, after we have both had a chance to think about it."

Of course, children differ in their response to parental influence. One of my children used to say, "Just tell me to do it because I'm your mother and I say so." The other wanted to understand the logic and purpose behind my request and if it made sense to her, agreed without further discussion. (You might be able to guess which one grew up to be a scientist.) Influence behavior can be based on logic, on exchange or reciprocation, on alignment, or on authority, among other sources.

While power may be expressed in one direction, influence is, by its nature, reciprocal. I influence you, you influence me.

Influence is reciprocal

In families, parents can provide opportunities for their children to influence them by asking for their thoughts, insights, preferences, and ideas. This shapes the understanding of the child about their own intelligence, value, and possible pathways to take. It builds and supports their capability for leadership.

Making influence discussible can be a valuable experience. Letting your children (and perhaps your spouse!) know how best to influence you benefits everyone. They will be less frustrated, and you can be more flexible and generous while still achieving your desired results. Sometimes it can be helpful to acknowledge that you need to know how best to appeal to them. "What would convince you to...?" "How can we make this work for both of us...?"

Power and influence are not the same thing

There is an important distinction, not always well-understood, between power and influence. **Power** is a set of resources you have control over. **Influence** is the behavior you use to achieve your objectives through others. When children are young, their power is less evident but continues to grow as they become less dependent on adults. There is a real change in the balance of power in families at some point during their adolescence. Parents who accept this change with grace and don't try to hold onto hierarchical power when it has reached its real limit can continue to influence their children throughout the remainder of their lives. They retain the resources of love, support, and wisdom as a basis for influential family relationships.

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Founder of **The Influence Guru**, Kim Barnes is a coach, facilitator, and author with more than forty years of experience in leadership, influence, and organization development. She was a founder and, for many years, CEO of Barnes & Conti Associates, and developed or co-developed programs including *Exercising Influence*, *Inspirational Leadership*, *Intelligent Risk-Taking*, *Consulting on the Inside*, and *Managing Innovation*. She is the author of six books, including *Exercising Influence* (Wiley) and *Building Better Ideas* (Berrett-Koehler). She works with enterprise companies, government agencies, small businesses, and individuals from the San Francisco Bay Area.

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