On Your Mind – July/August, 2019

Back To School Theme

**Jonathan C. Robinson, Ph.D.**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 So, my son is starting middle school this year and he thinks he’s grown. I asked him when he wanted me to go school supplies shopping for him and he grunted, “Maaa, what are you doing? I can get my school supplies myself.” I know he’s getting older, but when do I start letting go? Signed, Confused and Left Behind

Dear C&L,

 When I was growing up there was a popular song on the radio called “Breaking Up Is Hard To Do.” You know what else? Letting go is hard to do. To directly answer your question, you should have started letting go of your middle schooler right after he came out of your womb. Letting go is not a time. It’s a process.

 Now, to the issue at hand. Start by active listening his feelings about doing his back-to-school shopping himself. As a middle schooler, he might also be feeling self-conscious about being with his mom out in public. After you’ve helped him identify his feelings, ask permission to offer some options. Then, move into problem-solving with him to where you can be assured that he is getting the needed clothes and supplies, while respecting his need to be stylish and “in.” If he insists on going shopping by himself or with his friends, agree on the items on the list and on how all of this gets paid for.

 Generally, you want to reinforce his independence, responsibility, and adolescent identity, while also assuring him that you have his back. Will such endeavors always go perfectly? Uh, no. But they will always be a learning experience and a teachable moment for both of you.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My fourth grade daughter wants to try school lunches this year. I’ve been packing her lunch since she started school. It’s no trouble. In fact, I enjoy packing her lunch. I always slip a thoughtful note into her lunch box, with love. Now, she tells me that all her friends buy the school lunches now and she doesn’t want to be left out. Also, the notes make her “feel like a baby.” Is my little girl growing up? What about my needs and feelings? Signed, Now Unimportant

Dear Now,

 Did you know that there’s a new, informal, developmental stage for how your daughter is presenting. It’s called being a “tweenager.” The term, tweenage, acknowledges that, from ages 10-12, kids are not children any more, nor are they teenagers. So, they are “between ages,” hence, a tweenager.

 Yes, your little girl is growing up. Your lunchbox notes are cute, and she will cherish their memory when she has children of her own. But for now? Not so much.

 Habits at any age are hard to change. Your loving habits toward your daughter, packed lunches and loving, cute notes, are not what she needs now. Part of the parenting contract is keeping up with your child’s developmental stage and helping her navigate the one she’s in currently. As a tweenager, friends are becoming more important than family. Belonging is key. Stretching her boundaries is her goal in life. Accept her and reinforce who she is becoming, while cherishing who she was, as the bundle of joy that you and her dad created and birthed. By doing so, you maintain your importance in her life, as you help her navigate change.

 What about your needs and feelings? They continue to be important, and you are the one who satisfies them. Your daughter, nor anyone else, is not responsible for your needs and feelings.

 First, as family is important to you, use family meetings to secure your family-ness. Individual schedules, plans, collective chores and responsibilities, family vacations, other time together, all become apparent and part of the family collective consciousness when they are identified on a big calendar in the common area, where everybody passes by it each day. If you need to give your daughter cute and loving notes, and have no lunch box to put them in, then put a note on her bed at night.

 Second, fill your needs and feelings in other ways. Participate in a mom’s group, where all of you can commiserate together. Plan outings with friends and others with hubby. Stay active and fit. God does call us to “raise your children in the ways of the Lord, so that, when they grow old, He will not depart from them.” Proverbs 22:6. However, that raising part has many forms, as our children grow older. Also, while this counsel is about being there for your children, we also are charged to “love one another, as you love yourself.” Matthew 22:6. Be there for them, and also be there for yourself. Happy parenting.