

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My mother died recently and left me her house. It's in a very nice upper-middle-class neighborhood, and my family and I are very grateful for the home. The problem is, we are having trouble keeping up with the "Joneses." Our neighbors have prosperous jobs, and their kids seem to have everything. Since our house is paid off, we don't have a mortgage payment, but there are plenty of other bills. My husband is a full-time graduate student, and even with a part-time job, he earns only a small income. I work part-time, but with three kids, I have my hands full. Our eldest child, twelve-year-old Allison, is always upset because she can't afford some of the things the other kids can, like an expensive summer camp, new clothes from the best shops, and regular trips to a local amusement park. She says she doesn't want to hang out with these other kids because she can't do what they do. I'm sorry that we can't afford all these things right now, but I'm also very tired of her complaining about all the things she doesn't have. This was not a problem before we moved here and were living in a small apartment across town with lots of other families in our same financial boat. Suggestions?

-- Deborah

Dear Deborah,

What a great opportunity to share some of your most important values with your pre-teen. It's time to sit down with Allison for a chat, and a reality check.

Before you have this little tete-a-tete, review your own values. What kinds of behaviors do you (and your husband) model for your kids? Do you emphasize and value materialism over relationships in your own conversations, choices, and actions? What matters more, fancy clothes or a warm, loving family? When raising children, what you do will always hold greater power than what you say. As a parent, you probably already know that.

Once you're certain that more meaningful values are at the core of your family culture, remind Allison of these. Tell her that both you and her dad are working very hard to provide for your family. Remind her of her father's ambition to earn an advanced degree and that, until he graduates, your budget simply doesn't include some of the special things that the other neighborhood kids are able to afford. That does not mean that she is being deprived of anything she really needs. It also does not mean that those families are better or, in any way, more important. You are just in different places on the economic scale. Big deal.

Then ask Allison for her help. A twelve-year-old can contribute by helping with her younger siblings, as well as being responsible for some simple chores. By the way, I'm a great believer in having every family member contribute to the greater good. Even young children can be responsible for picking up their toys, setting the table, watering the lawn, and so on. It's important for kids to feel like they are part of the

family team and contributing to the household work that must be done is a great way of showing it.

Allison might also consider finding some ways to earn a little money of her own by babysitting or washing cars. She may very well be able to provide her own income for some – though not all -- of the things she feels are lacking in her life, like an occasional purchase at that fancy store. Most amusement parks have season passes. With some hard work and focus, she's old enough to earn money for that, though the tony summer camp may be out of reach on your income, and her babysitting earnings.

Suggest some ways that Allison can hang out with these neighborhood children using creative ideas instead of big bucks. Encourage her to invite some of these children to your home. It's probably not out of financial reach for her to host a "movie" night with a popular DVD, popcorn, and soda. Sleepovers generally don't bust the family budget (though they do usually interfere with a good night's sleep). Reinforce your family values that real friends don't care whether or not you have a lot of money. Real friends value you for yourself. And those who don't were never really friends to begin with. There's an important lesson to be learned here that will benefit Allison far into the future – long after the disappointment of missing summer camp.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.

