

# Nag your teens into thinking for themselves

It's that time again. The malls are filled with all the essential school supplies. By essential, I mean iPods, tiny cellphones, shoes, layered tees,



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hoodies, cargo pants and jeans. On one hand, it's fun to watch students get excited about the upcoming school year.

On the other hand, I'm a

grown-up now and after a while, the vortex of materialism has a nauseating effect on me.

I speak to thousands of teens each month at their schools and in conferences. I recently had an interesting conversation with a group of 14- and 15-year-old girls (whose identities, for their parents' sake, will remain secret). The conversation took an interesting turn when we started discussing back-to-school shopping and how they handled a difference of opinion with their parents when it comes to the appropriateness of



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Cellphones are only one of the things kids nag their parents for

a purchase.

One of the girls chimed in, "I just keep asking until my mom gives in." They agreed that nagging did the trick.

I found that the "nag factor" has actually been studied. The Center for a New American

Dream found that 12- to 17-year-olds will ask an average of nine times before parents give in. The really persistent ones will ask up to 50 times.

I'm not trying to debate whether advertising has a damaging effect on teens. You can choose whether or not to believe if ad saturation causes our children anxiety, low self-esteem and poor financial self-control. One thing is certain: The kid business is big business.

Companies are banking on parents taking a passive role in their kids' shopping habits. Parents know it is easier to give in than to listen to their teenager whine. They know it is easier to not ask questions than it is to watch their children roll their eyes and deliver sarcastic responses.

The only problem is the rest of us will have to deal with a narcissistic "me" generation whose judgment is weakened by the impulse buy.

Across the country, I've noticed that kids are capable of lucid moments when they make

sound, well thought-out decisions. This occurs more frequently in some than in others, but most of the time they just need to pause and take one second to think. They need to be guided into a paradigm shift.

Teens don't want to be cookie cutter versions of the person next to them. But in the face of convincing multimillion-dollar ad campaigns and the absence of someone asking provocative, life-defining questions, they often can't help themselves.

Shouldn't we find or create teachable moments in our classrooms and households?

Kids need to know that there is a difference between fashion being a definition of who they are and fashion being an expression of who they are. Don't let them sell you on the idea that they can buy their individuality.

Ask them to explain how they are defining themselves first, then discuss ways that they can express themselves. Answers should emphasize their talents and qualities, not focus

on physical appearance.

The job of most ads is to make us unhappy with what we have. Why not ask, "What is the one thing you want that money can't buy?" You'll find they want many of the same things you do — love, respect, good friends, a safe school and health for their loved ones.

Being a teenager is tough. Navigating complex emotions is further complicated by various groups vying for their attention and their money. If your children aren't used to probing conversation, they might throw the word back at you, "Stop nagging me, Dad!"

What would happen if we turned the tables? What if we asked the question nine times? Shouldn't our resolve be stronger? Putting an end to the "nag factor" might be the best medicine for curing that nagging pain in your bank account.

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