On Your Mind, September 2018

**Birthdays**

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 My soon-to-be 10 year old Alex has a birthday coming up. I was talking with my neighbor, Mandy, about how the rule is that Alex can do no wrong on his birthday. We give him a pass on bad behavior, as part of his special day. Mandy was aghast! She said we were enabling him to get away with stuff and teaching him that bad is good and that he can go through life with no consequences for his behavior. What do you think?

Signed,

Puzzled

Dear Puzzled,

 Sounds like your neighbor Mandy is a good friend. Okay friends tell you what they think you want to hear. Good friends tell you straight up. I don’t know if the free pass birthday is a family tradition or how long it has been going on, but might I suggest that you modify it somewhat?

 When Alex was a toddler, his bad behavior might have been cute and he was clueless. However, at age 10 now, he is beginning the latency age of child development, usually ages 10-12. Before age 10, parents are always right and the best thing since sliced bread. After age 12, parents, for a while, become the enemy. During those latency years, ages 10-12, life is confusing and the jury is out about parents. Sometimes they’re okay, sometimes not. Giving Alex a free pass birthday at his current age just adds to the confusion, especially if the rules are clear and spelled out the rest of the time.

 Add to the mix the fact that kids will always test the limits of parental boundaries. His testing is not because he’s a wild child. More significantly, he (and all children) will test the limits to be sure that the limits are firm. No limits means the kid is in charge. There’s nothing more terrifying, more anxiety-producing for a child than to be in charge.

 So, rather than giving Alex a free pass birthday, which at his age he would test that limit by creatively acting out, perhaps you might let him choose a special event, trip to a theme park, bowling, or the movies. He’s in charge of the choice and everybody goes as a family outing. He feels special on his birthday, but you don’t increase his panic or anxiety or limit-testing behavior by giving him a free pass birthday.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 So, my Alison is turning 12 in two weeks. She wants a sleepover party. Her baby sister, Emma, is now 6. She’s thrilled that Alison is having a sleepover and can’t wait to join in the fun. Alison loves Emma dearly. She plays baby dolls with her and helps her learn new stuff. But she’s afraid that Emma will “ruin everything” if she is a part of the slumber party. I think Alison is making a mountain out of a molehill. What do you think?

Signed,

Overreaction?

Dear Overreaction,

 You know what? I think Alison is just being Alison. It’s her birthday and she should have a say about including Emma in the sleepover or not. Most 6 year olds hog the attention of older peers, especially if she has that “cute” factor. Allison may be fearing that her darling little sister will take the fun out of the party or take attention away from her. If these are the only two children in the family and Emma was the “surprise pregnancy,” then she may be used to getting what she wants.

 How about divide and conquer. You certainly want Emma to be a part of the birthday celebration. So maybe you have a separate family birthday time before or after the sleepover. Help Emma make a special birthday gift for her sister and make a big deal in presenting it to her. Then, when it gets time for the sleepover, whisk Emma away to grandma’s house for her own sleepover. If that’s treat enough for her, great. If not, she could make it special by inviting one of her own playmates to sleepover with her. Allison gets her special time with her friends on her birthday. Emma gets to celebrate the day with her sister in the family gathering, and then she gets her special time with the grandparents. Win-win?