On Your Mind – Sept/Oct, 2019

Birthday Party’s Theme

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

# Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Okay, so my 13 year old daughter, Amy, says she wants a boy-girl birthday party this year. Up to this point in her life, she has always opted for a girl friends sleepover. I’m good with pajamas, nachos and cheese dip, popcorn and a silly teenager movie. My folks wouldn’t even let me date until I was 16 years old. I know her hormones are raging. I overhear her and her friends talk on the phone about all the “cute guys” at school all the time. So, what’s my play here? Do I say “no” to the boy-girl birthday party? Do allow it? Am I the designated bad guy or good guy?

Signed,

So Confused

Dear So,

 I know what you are going through, so can I call you by your first name, So? LOL Anyway…I think you are overthinking all of this. It gives me a headache.

 Let’s go back to the beginning. Amy asks if she can have a boy-girl party for her 13th birthday. Why that? Why now? This isn’t a question you have to answer by yourself. Certainly get her father’s input, but more importantly, use the question as a launching point into a teachable moment. In general, parents want to follow the Principle of Responsible Freedom in these circumstances. That is, you give Amy as much freedom as she demonstrates responsibility. If she becomes irresponsible, then you pull back on the freedom.

 To the point at hand, if she is generally a responsible, engaging, cooperative daughter, then her request gives you opportunity to exercise this principle. However, with freedom comes accountability and supervision.

 Instead of simply telling Amy yes or no, sit her down with, “Well, sweetheart, let’s talk about what that would look like and how that would happen. Take her lead in talking about the guest list, food, entertainment options, clean up, all the details. If she’s thinking make out session with all the lights out, that’s a no brainer, hard no. But, within reason, it is her party. Be present, but not obvious. If this is a new thing with her crew, consider her sending out e-vites and getting RSVPs to plan ahead. Done well and cooperatively, the planning will be as much fun as the party for both of you. Let me know how it goes.

Dear Dr. Robinson,

 Becoming 10 years old is a big deal in our family. Double digit years and all. Our youngest, Adam, is reaching that milestone soon. We want to give him a surprise birthday party with his friends and family at a local theme park. Adam has been a guest at the surprise parties of his older siblings and had fun with it all. However, since it’s kind of a family thing, he expects a surprise party for his birthday. The thing is, he says he hates surprises. He’s a bit anxious in general, and self-conscious around crowds and when he is the center of attention. So, I understand where he’s coming from. Question, Do we honor his request for a “normal” birthday celebration, or go all out, like we usually do?

Signed,

Stuck

Dear Stuck,

 Quick, snarky question. Whose birthday celebration is it? If it is Adam’s, and these are his wishes, then I encourage you to honor his wishes. If he regrets his decision after the fact, then that’s a lesson learned. Thing is, you describe his personality in such a way that a surprise could be very unsettling for him. He probably doesn’t like kids jumping out of hiding at him and saying “boo” either. If the surprise party is the family excuse to have a big bash together, then have the fun time, just not with the surprise to Adam.

 To get an accurate reading of what Adam really wants and why, use your active listening skills to tune into his feelings. As he opens up, ask, “and what else?” until you get the full picture, concluding with, “Is that everything?” Taking time and making effort to understand his needs and feelings could end up being the best birthday gift ever for Adam, and you are not so Stuck anymore. Happy birthday, Adam.