



A Parent's Guide to  
**INFLUENCERS**

**axis**

*"Influencers think that because they have some audience, they have the power. And of course they have some power, but they should be careful in how they use it."*

— [Tim Bax, iCrossing](#)

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### **This guide will help you discuss these questions...**

- ✓ What is an influencer?
- ✓ Is being an influencer good or bad?
- ✓ How do influencers get platforms?
- ✓ Why are influencers appealing to teens?
- ✓ How do I bring Biblical principles into a conversation about influencers??
- ✓ What does my teen need to understand about influencers?

# Shifting Sands

Social media has changed a lot since its inception. It began as a way to keep in touch with family and friends and be a part of people's lives no matter how far away they lived. In many ways that's still true, but it's also become a global platform for anyone who wants to use it; a true free-for-all of content. 95 million photos and videos are posted to Instagram [every day](#), and 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube [every single minute](#). You can get lost down a rabbit hole of endless content that spans everything from the latest meme to commentary on religion, philosophy, social issues, and self-help. That's a lot to keep up with—or compete with if you're trying to get your content out there.

If we were to be on social media platforms for only two hours a day, that would tally up to over five years of time over the course of [our lives](#). [According to the Pew Research Group](#), 95% of teens have access to a smartphone, and of the more than half of teens who use YouTube, Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram, 35% say they use those apps “almost constantly.” That's a huge demographic for people creating social media content, and brands, movements, and celebrities alike have realized the power of having that kind of audience to persuade people to engage in a [desired behavior](#). Enter: the social media influencer.

# What is an influencer?

An influencer is someone who uses their social media presence and platforms to influence others to believe, buy, or do something (or commonly, all three). An influencer ultimately uses their power to market products (their own or someone else's) to their large online following, and by doing so make money, which is why it's now [considered a job](#). Many influencers start out on Instagram or TikTok with a small audience and build it by posting consistently and making connections with their [followers](#). Typically, they make a name for themselves inside a niche and become an authority there. They can build brands around anything—like eating healthy or creating art—and they share their lives with people who are eager to listen. Some examples are:

- » Health influencers, who post about their workouts or nutrition tips
- » Book influencers, who post content about their current reads, reviews, “bookish” humor, and recommendations
- » Makeup artists, who post tutorials, share favorite brands, and test out new products
- » Cosplayers, who make and wear costumes from books, movies, TV shows, and history
- » Comedians, who craft short content like skits and impressions
- » Photographers and cinematographers, who post projects, events, and “behind the scenes” or “how-to” content about their work
- » Fashion and interior design influencers, who make content about their outfits or houses, where to shop, and their must-have purchases
- » Commentators, who give their opinions about media, trends, and internet goings-on
- » Video-essayists, who create long-form content (usually on YouTube) diving into a variety of subjects with research and analysis

In order to grow their platform and reach, influencers are on their social media platforms every day, engaging with their audience, growing relationships, and gaining trust. But for the most part, they don't just do it for fun; they want to monetize their accounts and get paid (e.g., by YouTube for ads played on their videos and/or by sponsors who pay them to market their products). Companies want to use influencers because they work differently than traditional marketing. When an influencer you trust recommends a product, it feels the same as a friend telling you they tried something and think you would like it. It's a much more personal feeling than a professional ad campaign.

There is also an element of fame and notoriety to being an influencer that sounds similar to being a celebrity, and in many ways it is. The main difference between traditional celebrities and influencers typically has to do with how a person became famous. Celebrities are people who achieve stardom for something they do offline (acting, sports, politics, music, etc.), whereas influencers become famous for their online presence. If a celebrity doesn't ever create social media accounts (rare, but it happens), they are still known and have fans, but an influencer's fame depends on—and indeed is built by—their social media presence.

Gen Z often prefers influencers over traditional celebrities because of their level of interaction and relatability. Celebrities are often seen as distant, superior, unrelatable, and “other,” whereas influencers are viewed as more accessible, relatable, approachable, and similar to their followers. As the [Influencer Orchestration Network \(ION\)](#) points out, “Social media influencers inhabit a place between celebrities and friends,” meaning they feel like peers with whom Gen Zers have a relationship, but also like someone they can aspire to become. According to a Google study, “[70% of teenage YouTube subscribers](#) say they relate to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities,” and ION says that “social media creators get 12 times the number of comments that a traditional celebrity does.”

It's also important to note that celebrities and influencers are not mutually exclusive; influencers can become celebrities, and celebrities can become influencers—or it may be impossible to tell which one they were first (e.g., the Kardashians). In fact, nowadays people often become celebrities only because they already have a large online presence. Media companies tend to choose to hire the singers/actors/athletes who will bring fans with them over the ones who are virtually unknown. For this reason, many people feel the need to begin cultivating their “brand” or persona at younger and younger ages.

**Reflection questions:** If you're on social media, do you follow anyone who could be considered an influencer? What interests you about their content? If you aren't on social media, what kind of people do you look to for advice or inspiration about things that interest you?

# Where did influencers come from?

Advertising and marketing have changed significantly over the past few hundred years, with influencers slowly emerging thanks to the Internet, social media, and the need for companies to find ways around ad-blocking software (which targets [traditional online banner ads](#)). Combined with new abilities to harness word of mouth (which can lead to content “going viral”), marketers realized that younger generations trust product endorsements by people they feel as if they know (influencers) more than they trust them from people who feel separate and different (celebrities).

Companies love influencers because they introduce products directly to the customers. An influencer may have fewer followers than a celebrity, but their audience is engaged and invested. One Forbes article explains that using influencers in marketing strategies costs a lot less than contracting big names (celebrities). And much like established public figures, influencers can introduce the product directly to a company’s desired audience. But because it can be cheaper to use influencer marketing, companies can hire multiple influencers “for [a] [fraction of the cost](#) of a big name.”

When you see an ad pop up in the middle of a YouTube video, you might tune out or skip ahead, but influencers use their personal connections to make you want what they’re selling. Instead of just putting a commercial in front of you, they weave products into their regular content. Because they’re making real connections with people online, followers trust their recommendations. We trust the opinions of our friends, and companies trust the abilities of influencers to turn friends and followers into customers.

From a non-marketing perspective, the idea of being an influencer arose when everyday people realized that social media had effectively democratized fame, taking the power away from large corporations and media conglomerates and putting it in their hands. Anyone who wanted to get famous could do so simply by utilizing the power of social media. From early-days YouTubers like [Jenna Marbles](#) and [Smosh](#) to current big names like [Chris Olsen](#) and [Emma Chamberlain](#), influencers have evolved in their ability to attract sponsors and monetize their content while still appearing relatable and attainable.

What makes today’s influencers interesting, and what sets them apart from the influencers who enjoyed fame when social media was still in its nascency, is the blurred lines between their lives, their fame, and their jobs. For many influencers, their platform includes their relationships, their habits, and their senses of humor, and requires that viewers be brought into their worlds for the

content to make sense. Because of this, privacy has to be done away with to an extent; when you get the most traction on the videos you make from your bed or right after you go on a date, your ability to get paid is inextricably linked to that behavior. In this way, the modern influencer must reveal all to achieve success, something a pre-internet generation would have seen as an unthinkable sacrifice.

**Reflection questions:** How have you seen the internet change over the years? How do you think social media culture impacts people online and off?



# Why would someone want to be an influencer?

From the outside, being an influencer looks like a fun job. You can become an authority on a topic you're passionate about or things you enjoy, and inspire others who want to follow in your footsteps. The idea of getting money and fame just to do what you already enjoy doing—like being [such a big Harry Styles fan](#) that he hangs out with you at his concert, making jokes so relatable [that Vanity Fair writes about it](#), or playing your favorite video games so well that [111 million people take notice](#)—is one of the most attractive parts of being an influencer.

That sounds appealing no matter who you are, even more so to a teenager who may feel lost as to what they want to do with their future and sees influencers making it big every day. Between inflation, education and housing costs, fraught politics, and all the other normal parts of life that have daunted teenagers forever, the idea of entering adulthood the traditional way pales in comparison to the idea of doing it the influencer way. It's like a lottery ticket where you can increase your chances of winning by being funny/attractive/talented enough. It's not that teenagers don't see the potential for a fall, it's that every day their screens are filled with people taking off and flying high. With so much on the line, it's easy to understand why a teen might decide that the risks are worth the rewards.

Unfortunately, as with many things, it can be hard to understand the risks before you experience them, which is why it's important to talk to our kids about the ideas that appeal to them before they dive in, especially since [54% of American Gen Zers](#) say they would become an influencer if given a chance.

Since influencers as we know them today wouldn't exist without social media, it follows that all the problems related to social media—obsession with image, comparison, preoccupation with likes and follows, number of views, time spent online, etc.—are there for influencers. But because *everything* they do is focused on social media, they may experience these problems on steroids.

These issues lead to another problem that's not obvious at first glance. What we see when an influencer posts content is simply the result. What we don't see is how long it takes them to create that content. It seems like it should be easy to come up with things to post regularly, but as some influencers are making more apparent, it takes a ton of time to write, film, and edit even a five-minute YouTube video or keep up with a regular posting schedule on Instagram or TikTok.

When your job becomes a 24-7 responsibility with no time off ever, that can lead to burnout and exhaustion very quickly. Of course, it doesn't have to be that way. It's possible to set realistic expectations for followers early on by telling them when and how often to expect content, but posting less frequently typically leads to slower growth and monetization.

Beyond what we've already discussed, influencers also face pressure to conform to a certain image because their fans want it or because sponsors threaten to revoke their endorsements. There's also the fact that the internet can be a very cruel place. Anyone who is a public figure online is under constant scrutiny, with people waiting to pounce on anything that could potentially be controversial (like [this young woman](#) who became the subject of a TikTok drama after she brought home a sofa she found on the sidewalk). Teens might feel pressured to push the boundaries on their content to grow their audience, even if that means compromising their values or safety. Sometimes a person with an established platform will stumble on a teen's viral content and pull them into the limelight (as one teen was when she became famous [virtually overnight](#)), or at the very least a teen's audience might suddenly grow into something bigger than what they're prepared to handle. None of this even begins to speak to the fact that the teenage years are a time when young people are trying to figure out who they are, what they want, and what they stand for, so building a brand around something that could change a lot isn't always a good idea.

**Reflection questions:** In what ways have you seen your teens leap before they look? When have you done that? How can you encourage your teens to think long-term about the choices they make on the internet?

# How do I talk to my teen about influencers?

Whether your teen wants to be an influencer themselves or not, this is a conversation that's important to have because influencers exist in their world. If they're on social media they probably follow some, and they might know other teens who are serious about pursuing a social media career.

A good way to kick off this conversation is by asking your teen what influencers they have noticed on social media. Since teens spend a lot of time on social media, some of their interests and ideas may be coming from influencers. Be curious about what your teens engage with, who they think is worth following, and why. If your teen does follow any influencers, get acquainted with their content on your own time so you can enter into any conversations well-equipped and educated. It can also give you insight into the world of influencers as a whole, and how you might notice them impacting your teen when they can't see it themselves.

Next, rather than just telling them what you think, ask questions to encourage them to think for themselves. Here are some ideas:

- » Do you follow any influencers? Why do you follow them?
- » What makes this person qualified to give advice in this (or any) area?
- » Do you know how they became an influencer? Does that make you trust them more or less?
- » How does following them impact you?
- » Do you think the influencer lifestyle is really as great as it seems?
- » How can you be a positive influence on the people around you, whether that's online or in the real world?
- » If you were to become an influencer, is there a line you wouldn't be willing to cross, even if it could help build your brand or make money?
- » How do you define success? What would it take for you to consider yourself successful?
- » Is that different from how God defines success? Why or why not?

- » If you became an influencer, how would you want to influence your followers?
- » How would you use your influence to help others, glorify God, and bring true beauty to the world?

**Reflection questions:** How do you talk to your teens about the internet in general? What's the difference between conversations that have been productive and ones that haven't? How can you apply what you've learned to conversations about influencers?

# Does Scripture have anything to say about influencers?

What's most important in this conversation about influencers is how our interactions with them affect us, and the effects and influence we have on others. The name "influencer" is right on the nose: they are people to whom we devote our attention and time, and whose lives we observe and engage with. We can't help but reflect what we see and admire in our own lives, and Scripture speaks at length about who and what we should allow to have that power over us.

When we look at the stories told throughout Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings, we get a clear picture of how powerful influence can be. Before the time of the judges, Joshua had been a leader for the Israelites, one who devoted himself to following the Lord, obeying His commands, and not allowing himself to be influenced by the surrounding cultures. During his leadership, the Israelites also followed God, but after he died, the Israelites slowly forgot about all that God had done for them (rescued them from Egypt, lead them through the wilderness to the Promised Land, etc.), and they "did evil in the eyes of the Lord" (Judges 3:7). Scripture tells us that God's anger burned against them, so He allowed their enemies to prevail. Eventually, they cried out to Him for deliverance, and He provided a judge to lead them in battle. For a time, they followed God again. But time and time again, they strayed, needed rescuing, cried out to God, were given a leader, returned to God, then strayed again.

As [this video](#) points out, the many judges who ruled over the Israelites during this time varied in their devotion to God. And it's clear that the worse the ruler was, the more God's people strayed. Their influence made a tremendous difference. What's also worth noting is that, after a while, the Israelites still weren't satisfied, asking God why the other nations had kings and they didn't. God told Samuel that the people were not rejecting Samuel by asking for a king—they were rejecting God as their ultimate King (1 Samuel 8:4-9). In God's good design, He was the Israelites' leader and they were His special people, set apart for His glory. Instead of embracing their identity, the Israelites looked at what everyone else had and wanted that instead. They were discontent because they thought others had it better.

There are many levels of influence to analyze here, but what's quite clear is that no one should have more influence on what we love, desire, pursue, hope for, and believe than God Himself. If anyone else holds this power in our lives, we will be led astray. In addition, these Old Testament

records illuminate just how much responsibility and power a leader or influencer has. It's no small task to be in such a position, and we are responsible for how we guide, teach, and influence others (James 3:1).

**Reflection questions:** What influences have you had in your life that drew you close to God? What are some that didn't?

# Worth a Follow

It's daunting to think about what our kids could see online, and sometimes it feels like we can't make any rule that doesn't have holes. "Family" influencers aren't always family-friendly, influencers for young people grow up and change what they post to reflect that, and even Christian influencers aren't guaranteed to be presenting the message of the gospel, no matter what verses they have in their bio. Ultimately, we should use discernment when deciding whom to follow, no matter who they say they are. Outward appearances may be deceiving, and God tells us that [He looks deeper](#) than what we see on the surface. In a world where people can so easily masquerade as anything they want, discernment is necessary.

Discernment isn't just important on the internet, either. The word "influencer" has different connotations in the social media age than it did before the advent of the internet, but it still means the same thing; someone who, by what they do or say or how they behave, encourages us towards a path of action. Though some people get paid to take that title, it's something everyone can do, for better or worse, online and off.

That's why it's so important that we as parents stay engaged with our kids and talk with them about who they want to be. Every choice they make about who they want to be now has a consequence for who they become in the future. Because they don't always have the foresight to see that far down the road, it's our job to help disciple them in the word of God so their primary influence is Jesus Christ. If our character is shaped by the people we aspire to be like, then we must keep Jesus in front of us day and night, making him our only model, growing day by day closer to who we were meant to be.

**Reflection questions:** How can you be a good influence on your kids? What are ways you can model wisdom and discretion in who you allow to influence you?

# Call to generosity:

If you like what you learned in this Parent Guide and want to help us continue to make great resources to serve parents like you, consider making a gift at [axis.org/give](https://axis.org/give). Thank you!

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