

## Tough Road for Parents of Teens in the Britney Era

Pop superstar Britney Spears recently lost custody of her two young children. This follows apparent losses of her judgment, her career, and on multiple occasions, parts of her clothing. I feel bad for Brittany, just as I feel bad for tens of thousands of other parents who are sideswiped by the speeding blur of the 21<sup>st</sup> century fast lane version of sex, drugs, and rock n' roll, swerve off into the ditch, and lose custody of their children. These parents need help, and I hope they get it. (Many in fact do, going on to regain their children and live productive lives as reliable parents and citizens.)

But I'm more concerned about the millions of concerned parents who are trying desperately to raise responsible children in an era that portrays the party-happy lifestyle of Paris, Britney, and other skin-deep beauties as proof of the good life. My friends' sixteen year-old daughter, who I'll call Sara, is a case in point. A beautiful young woman with all the possibilities that a loving, competent, middle class family can provide, Sara is nonetheless swerving wildly on her own teenage road. Smoking, drinking, experimenting with drugs and sex—anything goes. Sara's reason for living these days is to be popular. And what defines "popular" better to a struggling teen than the pop culture icons of their media-driven world?

No, Sara doesn't literally ask herself, "What would Britney do?" before she chooses the most transparent top in her closet, one that hides as little as a wet T-shirt, to wear on a family outing. There is little doubt that she is influenced by the Britney crowd. However, Sara's desire to be "hot" is not Britney's fault. It's part of the Zeitgeist pushed along at accelerating speeds by a media well aware that sex sells to an image conscious society that requires constant titillation.

Active parents have to work hard to combat these messages. It's not easy. Working to build a solid core character in our children is an uphill drive, especially when the alternative looks like a whole lot of fun. Fortunately, the media also reports the fall of icons, and Britney's recent trouble can make for good dinnertime conversation about the dangers of excess. We don't need to preach to our kids to be saints, but moderation and balance is still the best prescription for health and happiness. Our kids also need us to set good examples, provide respectful boundaries and discipline, spend time with them, communicate with them, encourage them, and love them like crazy. Do that, and when it's time to say, "Sorry, that top isn't appropriate," they just might listen.

I noticed that a court has required Britney and her former spouse (and children's father), Kevin Federline, to take a parenting class. While I am a firm believer in the "it's never too late" philosophy of self-improvement, I can't help but wish that they had taken a course or two before all this happened. Parenting in today's over-the-top pop culture requires up-to-date information, a new set of skills, and lots of support. We get training for every other job in our society that is both important and difficult, so why not for parenting, too? Over the past thirty years I've seen such courses help immensely. The most forward-thinking parents take a class *before* there is trouble, when the kids are still young and more easily influenced. But even after the fact, a good parenting course can

be a lifeline for a troubled family. As one mother said when commenting on the value of a course she took, “The greatest gift for me was the reawakening of the feeling of joy for my children.” I wish that joy for Britney and all parents. Maybe some day we will see parent education become as popular among parents as the temptations of the road are to many of their teens.

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**About Michael Popkin** Dr. Popkin is best known as the pioneer of video-based parent education with the introduction of *The Active Parenting Discussion Program* in 1983. Since then, millions of parents have completed his parenting courses, including the best-selling *Active Parenting Now* and *Active Parenting of Teens*. A frequent keynote speaker and media guest, Dr. Popkin has appeared on hundreds of shows including “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and Montel Williams, and as a regular parenting expert on CNN. Look for his newest book, *Taming the Spirited Child: Strategies for Parenting Challenging Children without Breaking Their Spirits* (March 2007, from Fireside/Simon and Schuster). You can visit his website at [www.ActiveParenting.com](http://www.ActiveParenting.com).

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