

A woman with long blonde hair is sitting on a checkered blanket in a field. She is wearing a grey sweater and light-colored pants. She is holding a large orange pumpkin in her lap. The background is a field of tall grass and some trees. The entire image has a green tint and a white border.

A Parent's Guide to
MANIFESTING

axis

"Half the Truth is often a great Lie."

— Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanac*

A Parent's Guide to **MANIFESTATION**

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This guide will help you discuss the following questions:

- ✓ Why is manifesting popular?
- ✓ Why are teens interested in manifesting?
- ✓ How is manifesting related to other spiritual practices?
- ✓ Is manifesting spiritually dangerous?
- ✓ What does the Bible tell us about spirituality?
- ✓ How can we honor God in our spiritual walk?

Good Vibes Only

The hum of a Tibetan singing bowl and ethereal synth music that may or may not be an instrumental from a Billie Eilish song play softly under audio of someone chanting: “I always get what I want. That’s just the way it is.” The audio accompanies a video of a beautiful woman with perfect skin and effortlessly wavy hair, in head-to-toe Lululemon apparel, a beatific smile on her perfectly glossed lips. The caption declares, “since I started manifesting with this audio, every single thing in life has gone my way.” The comment section is filled with thousands of people expressing understandable sentiments: “I want this,” “I claim this energy,” “I need this so bad, I’m manifesting it!”

This video may not exist exactly as we’ve described it, but if you were to search #manifesting on TikTok, you’d find many videos like it. Videos with this hashtag collectively have [8.6 billion views](#) as of this writing (for those keeping count, there are only 8 billion people currently alive on earth). A large number of those videos are like the one just described, others are how-tos on getting the universe to work for you, and many just include a viral sound and promise nebulous “positive results” if you make a video with the sound yourself. A large portion of the videos are also obvious grifts, with creators promising 77 hours of luck, a year of success, a smaller nose, a raise, a surprise confession of love from the cute girl in Algebra 2—if you just like/share/comment on their video or click the link in their bio to join their manifesting masterclass at a generous discount.

But the thing is, the grifts are getting tens, sometimes hundreds, of thousands of views and likes. They grab viewers with headlines like “USE WITH CAUTION: YOUR WISHES WILL COME TRUE!” and “guys, I actually can’t believe this worked, but he just called me.” Once they’ve reeled you in they keep you watching and engaged (read: boosting their content for the TikTok algorithm) with low-risk, high-reward promises that you will get everything you ever dreamed of and more if they’re telling the truth, and if they’re lying your life will be exactly as it is now. What’s the harm?

And that is the question. Surely liking a manifesting TikTok or even posting my own can’t have any consequences. It’s just a video. It might as well be a fairy tale; it’s more than likely not real, but if it is, there’s a promise of a happy ending for all. Manifesting is, in fact, a bit like a fairy tale. Only it’s less Cinderella and more Rumplestiltskin. It’s not harmless at all, because it creates a vision of a world where ultimate happiness requires no reciprocity, no sacrifice. In reality, there is nothing in life we receive that does not demand something of us in return.

What is manifesting?

To answer this question, we must look to something called the [New Thought Movement](#). While many people associate spiritualism, mysticism, and general “woo-woo” ideas with the [hippy culture](#) of the 1960s and 70s, many aspects of these philosophies actually can be traced back to the ideas of a 19th century clockmaker named [Phineas Quimby](#). Quimby lived in New Hampshire during a period in history in which people were obsessed with the connection between the mind and the body. [The Enlightenment](#) and [the Industrial Revolution](#) were both coming to a close, and the result was a world where the physical had become untethered from the supernatural. Religion—Christianity specifically—was no longer a given for everyone, and was in fact starting to be considered an irrational and ridiculous belief for any educated person to hold. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of *Sherlock Holmes* [argued that](#), “Christianity must change or must perish” in the face of scientific progress.

The New Thought Movement arose as a reaction to the ways that modernism was making less room for the spiritual world, and tried to scientifically articulate the fact that people still felt a deep need for supernatural connection. Phineas Quimby felt this desire to push back against pure materialism, and [formulated a theory](#) that science was just another name for God, and that as the instruments of science were in his hands, so was the power of God. In other words, the spiritual and the physical weren't separate at all, as the Enlightenment thinkers argued. But Quimby took a key belief of Christianity—that the spiritual realm deeply impacts the physical realm—and began to argue, if the spiritual could control the physical, why couldn't the physical control the spiritual too?

The New Thought Movement called this idea “The Infinite Intelligence,” the assertion that every person is divine, and that because of our divinity what we think and feel and want has so much power that it becomes reality. Or, in other words, it manifests. Along with this concept come a lot of other phrases and words that may sound familiar, like “the law of attraction,” “animal magnetism,” “visualization,” and “affirmations.” If none of these words ring a bell, but the whole idea gives you déjà vu, it's likely because there are hardly any religions the New Thought Movement *didn't* borrow from—it's credited with popularizing the hybrid Buddhist/Hindu/Christian/Native American/Pagan syncretism that remains prolific to this day.

If you're wondering why we're starting with a history lesson, it's important to understand that manifesting and its associated practices didn't emerge with TikTok and [meditation apps](#) and

[“cattitude” tarot decks](#) featuring a sassy illustrated tabby as the queen of pentacles. It’s easy to dismiss today’s easy-to-swallow spiritualism as silly, surfacey, and shallow, but it’s built on a centuries-old philosophy that emerged as a reaction to global events that still ripple through our world. When a teen sees a manifesting post on Instagram or TikTok, they’re not just seeing 30 seconds of content. They’re seeing all the way back to the teachings of Phineas Quimby, as he worked to wrangle the power of God into his own hands.

So, with that established, what does manifesting look like today? According to an article in [Self Magazine](#), “Manifestation as a self-help exercise refers to focusing your thoughts on a desired outcome—through practices like mindfulness, visualization, and meditation—in order to try to bring it into reality. Essentially, the idea is that you think your personal goals into existence.” It’s the concepts of The Infinite Intelligence and the divine self watered down a bit and reframed in language that teens understand—self-help, mindfulness, and therapy-speak—that makes the ideas accessible. While the average member of Gen Z or Gen Alpha might be put off by the argument that they’re gods, it’s not too distasteful to believe that really, really, *really*, wanting something could make it real. In fact, it’s pretty seductive.

Reflection questions: How do you notice culture talking about spirituality? Do you have any personal experiences with alternative spirituality?

Why might the idea of manifesting appeal to a teen?

Part of manifesting's allure lies in the fact that it is at least partially scientifically demonstrable. When we want something to be real, we often start experiencing proof of it. Part of this is [confirmation bias](#), which predisposes us to trust things that support beliefs we already have. But perhaps a more important factor is what author David Robson refers to as “the expectation effect.” [In his book](#) of the same name, he argues that when we expect an outcome, we are more likely to experience it because we are subconsciously working to make it happen. He refers to two studies to demonstrate this.

[In the first study](#), it was found that people who took placebo pills—prescription-free pills designed to test if medications actually worked or if symptom relief was psychosomatic—reported feeling better, even when they *knew* the pill was a placebo. And that's not just for mental health issues like anxiety or depression which might actually be relieved if a patient believed they were being affected, but for physical ailments like irritable bowel syndrome or lower back pain. People who know what placebos are and know that they're taking one still expect to experience the placebo effect, and as a result they do in fact feel better.

[The second study](#) involved having a group of people without facial scars or disfigurements get prosthetic ones from makeup artists. They were told to spend the day with the disfigurement and notice people's reactions to them. They were to pay special attention to whether people were rude to them, judgmental, or otherwise discriminatory. Right before the participants went out, the makeup artists told each participant that they needed to touch up the prosthetic, and instead removed it without telling the subject. When the subjects returned from their day, all of them reported that the people they interacted with had been embarrassed around them, and even cold or outright cruel to them. In reality, they noticed this behavior only because they subconsciously expected it, both because of their preexisting ideas of how society treats people with visible disfigurements and because the idea that people would be unkind was specifically suggested when the researchers told them to pay special attention to negative reactions. The study argues that the subjects might even have provoked this behavior by being ashamed, angry, or rude themselves without noticing it. Their entire perspective of life shifted based exclusively on what they expected to happen.

When it comes to manifesting, the expectation effect plays an active role in the success of the practice. Repeating “I will ace this test” and believing it with all your heart might encourage you to study harder because you’re not fighting off anxiety and hopelessness. It might even improve your performance during the test itself because you feel calm, confident, and prepared. If you “manifest” that your date will fall in love with you over dinner, you’re more likely to shed your nerves and enjoy the moment. Manifesting content tells you that good things are coming your way, and tells you to be looking out for evidence. It sounds like magic, but it’s really just a psychologically effective dose of optimism and rose-colored glasses.

Beyond the obvious fact that all of us want our lives to be better, today’s teens might be drawn to manifesting content because of the circumstances of the world they’re growing up in. In the wake of a world that was fundamentally changed by the rise of the internet, young people have been coached into a perspective that puts them at the center of the universe. This doesn’t mean conscious selfishness; it’s an unself-aware self-obsession fed by social media taglines like “posts suggested for you,” “recommendations based on your watch history,” and of course TikTok’s home feed, the infamous For You Page.

In her book [Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World](#), Tara Isabella Burton talks about the unique phenomenon of spirituality that today’s young people are experiencing in response to a world that has put complete and total focus on the individual. She addresses the idea that millennials and Gen Z are irreligious “Nones,” as they have often been called, and suggests that they are better described as “Remixed.” The Remixed are not unspiritual, in fact, in many ways they are more spiritual than previous generations who expressly identified as Christians. The difference is that the Remixed find traditional religion fits their hyper-individualistic worldview like a straightjacket, and go searching for spiritual fulfillment their own way. The result is, Burton writes:

The rise of bespoke religious identities. The more individualized our religious identities become, the more willing we are to mix and match ideas and practices...The idea that our lives can and should be customized to our personal interests and wants and needs has bled into the way we construct our religious identities.

The internet has facilitated a world with confusing and contradictory stressors, and as a result young people feel a need to create a grab-bag of religious philosophies that give every problem a solution. [Caspar ter Kuile](#), Harvard Divinity scholar and host of the podcast [Harry Potter and the Sacred Text](#) says that, “in an Internet-defined generation we’re used to finding our own sources of information and mixing it together with eight different perspectives...people’s identities and relationships become mixed. Maybe they have Buddhist practice. Maybe they use a tarot deck.”

In addition to teaching our teens to require bespoke spirituality, the internet has also made an indelible impact on their mental health. [The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General](#) reports that teens who use social media for more than three hours a day are more than twice as likely to experience anxiety and depression, and since the average time most teenagers spend on socials every day is 3.5 hours, that's a pretty significant risk. Part of why social media has such a significant impact on teens' mental health is the things they see on their feeds. Violence, heartbreak, poverty, injustice, war, loss; it's like they have the four horsemen of the apocalypse in the palm of their hand all day. And worst of all, they're powerless to stop it. Corrupt politicians around the world, mega-corporations dumping oil in the ocean, every day a revelation about a celebrity who abused their power to harm others, and all they can do is share a post to "raise awareness." It's no surprise that in 2021, [42% of teens reported](#) feeling constantly hopeless.

It is into this culture that manifesting content lands. It's hardly a shock that teens who feel totally helpless to make a difference in an overwhelming world whose worldviews are shaped by commercialized syncretism and a desire for individualized spiritual fulfillment would be the perfect audience for what manifesting promises. In fact, it would be shocking if they didn't buy in, or at least find themselves a little bit curious.

Reflection questions: What things about culture have you noticed that might make manifesting appealing? Have the young people in your life ever expressed the feelings that might make manifesting interesting to them?

Is manifesting dangerous?

We've already discussed some of the reasons why manifesting might be harmful: its history with the New Thought Movement, its watering down and normalizing of syncretism, and its seductive offer of control. But the real danger of manifesting lies in the very thing it claims to be, namely, a connection to the spiritual world.

As Christians we believe that the spiritual realm is very real. We are told that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" ([Ephesians 6:12](#)) and that "God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth" ([John 4:24](#)). We believe in spiritual forces both good and evil, and we believe that they are actively engaged with our physical realities. So when people use spiritual practices to go fishing, they are casting their rod into a very full pond.

Manifesting is associated with several other ways people reach out to the supernatural, including transcendental meditation, tarot, crystals, and astrology. All of these practices have been made social media-friendly despite their roots in New Ageism, paganism, and witchcraft. Manifestation stands out from these practices and others because of its accessibility. It's easy, it's free, and anyone can do it. But manifestation is no less of an open call to the spiritual realm than a ouija board or a seance.

The Divine Intelligence of the New Thought Movement is more simply referred to today as the Universe. Whether you see the Universe as a sentient being, a nebulous energy, or something in between, manifesting hinges on the idea that "intentions" and "affirmations," the repeated phrases that make the manifesting work, are effective because of their ability to shape the Universe. This entity is presented as benevolent, friendly, even [playful](#). It wants to give us what we want, if only we ask. If we come honestly and earnestly to the Universe with expectation of blessing, it is more than happy to comply. It sounds remarkably like prayer.

Of course, manifesting influencers don't use that language, as the whole point is to be as "spiritual but not religious" as possible. But that doesn't make it less true. When we pray to something, it's because we believe it's powerful, and not just kind of powerful. We pray to beings we find powerful enough to worship. We may not realize that's what we're doing, especially if the kind of requests we're making aren't particularly reverent, but manifestation is an act of faith.

When we frame manifestation as prayer and take into account the way it shoots these prayers into the spiritual dark, we have a truly dangerous combination. Not to mince words: manifesting, under all its TikTok and Instagram aestheticization, is placing our faith in whatever spiritual forces will have us. Given that God doesn't function like a magic 8 ball or a vending machine, the spirits who do are not responding because they want us to flourish. They want to corrupt our eternal souls. There is nothing more dangerous than that.

Reflection questions: Why do you think people are so comfortable with reaching into the spiritual realm? How do you think interacting with unknown spiritual forces might affect us?

Does Scripture have anything to say about manifesting?

Among the hard lines drawn in the Bible regarding certain activities, reaching out to evil spirits for the power to control our lives is one of the more strictly forbidden. [Leviticus 19:31](#) spells it out: “Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.” [1 Samuel 28](#) recounts the story of how King Saul, feeling abandoned by God, sought out the witch of Endor (the region in northern Israel, not the planet of the [Ewoks](#) in *Return of the Jedi*). He asked her to summon the ghost of the prophet Samuel, and it worked. But Samuel wasn't pleased. He told Saul that because of the king's actions he and all his sons would die. He chose not to cry out to the Lord and instead sought spiritual power from another source. Within a few days, Saul's sons—including King David's dear friend Jonathan—were killed by Philistines, and Saul fell on his own sword, dying deposed from his throne and alone.

[Deuteronomy 6:4](#) makes a key claim about who God is: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In Judaism this is called the [Shema Yisrael](#), and is the heart of daily morning and evening prayers. It is a proclamation that God is *the* God. There are no others, nothing else and no one else worthy of worship and devotion. It's also the [first of the Ten Commandments](#): “You shall have no other gods before me.” Manifesting in and of itself directs what is essentially prayer and faith towards something that is not God, and that is not something God is okay with. It's idolatry, and Scripture is clear about the consequences of that.

That said, there are many people in the New Testament whose redemption stories include rejection of witchcraft. In [Acts 19:19](#) we are told that upon hearing the gospel, “a number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas.” A drachma was about a day's wages, so when these new believers professed their faith, they destroyed about 137 years' worth of paychecks. Power, money—the salvation of Christ was better than it all. As much as the Bible warns us that worship of anything but God and gaining power from any other source incurs His wrath, it also assures us that turning to Him in faith always invites His love.

Reflection questions: Are there any parts of your life that are directing worship to something other than God? Where else in Scripture does God emphasize that worship is only for Him?

How can I have a conversation about manifesting with my teen?

Although teens are in many ways primed to engage with manifesting content, not all of them will participate, believe in, or even be curious about it. For many teens, #manifesting probably won't even find its way onto their feeds, and if it does they're likely to dismiss it out of hand. But that doesn't mean they don't know anything about it. Even as a joke, the phrase "I'm manifesting it" is all over social media. With most things, jokes are harmless and curiosity is fine in moderation. But the reality of manifesting means that there is no safe level of engagement, and its popularity means it's essential to discuss with our teens.

A conversation about manifesting has the potential to be a cool opportunity to reflect on the way the things we've already discussed—control, individualistic spirituality, and idolatry—exist in our own lives. We may not recite "I don't chase, I attract" in the mirror every morning, but how often do we treat God like a giant vending machine that doles out blessings for really sincere prayers? Do we search for a way to feel better about our lives on our own and leave God pretty well out of it? Do we pick and choose the pieces of Christianity that appeal to us, and maybe even pick up another belief or two that makes everything more comfortable? Some of the best conversations start when we're honest about the ways we as parents aren't perfect.

Talking about manifesting can also be an easy way to speak into the things we talked about earlier. Whether they're into manifesting or not, teens still face a culture of self-obsession and pressure to customize their faith. They still exist in a world full of sin that shows itself every day on their feeds, and they can still feel totally helpless. Dealing with these things through manifesting isn't good, but there are plenty of unhealthy ways teens try to find their way. It's into this space that we as parents can step to bring the gospel to our teens in all its power.

[Isaiah 40:3](#) is part of a prophecy about the messiah. It says, "A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" These words foretell the life of John the Baptist, but they can also be an encouragement for us as we seek to disciple our teens. It's not hard to imagine the internet as a wilderness, and the bespoke religion of the Remixed might as well be a desert for all the nourishment it gives. Our call as parents is to be that voice calling out, reminding our teens that the Lord is here, guiding them through a dark and confusing world towards His clear and holy light. Teens crave a fulfilling spirituality in

their physical reality, and Christ came to offer both. When we take the time to help them understand the truth of God and the lies of evil, we pass on the gift of the all-fulfilling gospel and show them the physical reality of Jesus' pierced hands.

Reflection questions: What are ways you've seen culture making spiritual content more "palatable"? How does your family think and talk about the spiritual world?

Where Does My Help Come From?

At the beginning of this guide we said that there is nothing in life we receive that does not demand something of us in return. When it comes to manifesting, the advertised price is low, but the tax is unacceptably high. But the grace of God works within its own economy: salvation cost everything, but we didn't pay. Jesus gave us life at the price of his own.

Throughout Scripture it seems like God asks much of us, but the earning and striving and difficulty was covered by the blood of Christ. Enabled by the Spirit, everything God requires starts to become second nature, as easy as breathing. We have no more use for language like "get" and "take" and "have." Worship and prayer are exercises in giving up control. Faith means running to the arms of Christ, having done nothing to be welcome there. He's done it all.

Admitting our powerlessness makes space for His power. Confessing our individual needs gives us the opportunity to show His character in unique ways. Manifestation is a faith that puts us at the center, and when that happens, to borrow a phrase from poet [William Butler Yeats](#), "things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." There is only one power that can hold everything together, consistently, eternally. When Christ is at the center, we don't have to look anywhere else to receive everything we need.

Questions to start conversations with your teens:

- ✓ Have you seen content about manifesting online?
- ✓ Have you heard anyone joking about manifesting? Do your friends ever talk about it?
- ✓ What do you think about manifesting? Do you think it works?
- ✓ Do you think manifesting could be dangerous? Why?
- ✓ Why do you think God is so clear about the occult? Why would He care?
- ✓ Do you ever think of God as someone who should just give you what you want?
- ✓ How can we put God at the center of our lives?

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. Thank you!

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