

What does authority mean in your family?

I want to start the new year off with a discussion on authority. Many parents question my advocacy of sharing power with a child, rather than holding power over a child because they fear losing authority. In my mind, the family is a team; a team that forms a strong foundation for each of its members; a home base from which each member gains the confidence and strength to leave the base and contribute positively to society. So how does a successful team function?

A team is comprised of a group of two or more people linked in a common purpose. Teamwork is the combined efforts of the group. To be an effective team, the efforts of each member need to help the team as a whole succeed rather than only the individual member. A leader is always necessary to take charge of the direction of the team's functioning. All effective teams have a leader, a manager, a coach, a teacher—an authority figure.

In sports, each team member's job is clear and precise. There are specific rules of the game that must be followed. But in order to win, the individual skills and talents of the team members are necessary. Winning is clearly determined by scores. In the workplace, each team member is hired with the goal of helping the company succeed in its purpose. Leaders have the job of encouraging and motivating each team member to *want to* help the team. Whether with money or job status, each team member is motivated through self-interest. Team members need to be happy to be productive. Highly productive companies acknowledge that team members are best motivated through a buy-in of the company—a power shared situation of some kind to satisfy self-interest. And the best leaders are those who bring out and call upon the talents, the strengths—the “leader”—in each team member so the member is important to the team.

The first dictionary definition of authority is “the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.” However we know that authority enforced by holding power over team members does little to motivate them to work at their personal capacity. We all know leaders (teachers, bosses, parents) who inspire and motivate us as well as ones we resist and obey through fear.

A family works the same way.

The difficulty in the family, however, is that team members begin as dependents and then grow into separate individuals with minds of their own while still on the team. The leaders grow accustomed to controlling members during their dependency and often feel threatened when independence looms. Team members are not chosen or hired for their skills to benefit the family as a whole, so motivation becomes paramount.

However the family has an advantage over the ordinary team in its inherent bond. The bond is strengthened through relationship. Allowing personal power supports the child's self-interest of growing to a strong, productive, self-confident individual. The child's sense of purpose, creative and intellectual growth and sense of well being are fostered by an authority figure that inspires greatness rather than instills fear.

In the debate over the meaning of authority, social scientists argue that authority is not a "capacity" (of holding power, knowledge, etc.) but a "relationship". To expand on that, relationship requires mutual trust and respect in order for any member of the team to feel comfortable and important. Few of us want to be in relationship with someone who threatens with power, watches for shortcomings, loses emotional control, and criticizes and blames our actions more than encourages and motivates. Think of the teachers, coaches, and bosses you have worked hardest for. Chances are they are the ones who respected you and accepted you for who you are. That respect, that relationship, not only did not undermine their authority, it enhanced it.

Authority has less to do with power and fear, more to do with influence and motivation. Influence flows smoothly from a parent to a child through a pipeline of connection. The child trusts that his parent understands him and supports his needs. Many parents worry because their children don't fear them. But children resist any team effort when they feel alienated by fear.

As a parent, we are always in charge, always the authority. Allowing a child's personal power to make choices and decisions still leaves the parent in charge of the choices and decisions offered. To encourage teamwork, we need to inspire and motivate each child's innate potential not force behavior against their will. What makes us think we will gain

a child's cooperation by making him miserable? The family bond is of utmost importance to secure the home base from which our children can soar. We ultimately have no control over them and the choices they make. Our authority is best put to use in creating that solid influential relationship they will call upon throughout our lives.

Growing with your children rather than resisting them, encouraging their ability to problem solve rather than enforcing obedience with punishment and threats, accepting your child for who he is rather than molding him into who you want him to be, and encouraging his capacity for leadership through decision-making and negotiation is the best definition of authority I can think of.