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THE ROLE OF POWER IN DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN TROUBLED CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT: Power is a major issue in every relationship between a caregiver and a youth. In this article, the author explores forms of power, the significance of power in relationships, instruments for exercising power, and misuses of power.

The crisis ends abruptly. The children are quiet now and you feel a surge of relief. Surely your skill and effectiveness as a caregiver are increasing. Your reactions were quick and appropriate, the intervention techniques just and successful. Was it your words or your actions that solved the problem? Could it be what you chose not to do that made the difference? Nevertheless, you are beginning to realize your behavior as a caregiver can make a real difference in a child's life.

Caregivers have seemingly unlimited time in influencing children's behavior. A group living situation can be described as a "therapeutic milieu" where treatment is not constrained to one hour of therapy, but is rather an ongoing hour-by-hour opportunity for changing the child's behavior (Trieschman, 1969; Whittaker, 1969).

The methods in teaching alternative behavior are also numerous. Each caregiver has only to select a technique that looks promising based on his knowledge of the child, his own education, experience, personality, and the goals of the treatment team or organization.

It is up to the caregiver to consistently react to a child's behavior. He must also survive with the child's symptoms as long as they last. Survival with a child's symptoms is often strongly dependent on how well the child's ego is functioning. Even when it is weak, the child's environment must be manipulated and his behavior handled (Redl, 1951).

Thus, a caregiver is a powerful figure in the life of a child. He has the potential to offer a child hope for the future. If he is consistent and just, he can build trust. If he is positive and competent, he can use identification as a powerful means of changing a child's behavior. If he is observant and discriminating, he can teach self-control using reward and punishment. A child's competence can be developed by providing experiences that teach problem-solving skills. If the caregiver is astute, sensible, and has a good relationship with a child, he can facilitate insight into feelings or behavior. The child can discover how his feelings are connected to his present behavior. There is "power" in this discovery, for it can guide the future and aid in understanding the past (Trieschman, 1969; Whittaker, 1969).

The caregiver has within his reach an assortment of tools in helping troubled children. He possesses power based on his adult role as caregiver, but also as an activator of the power children themselves need in growing emotionally. The intent of this paper is to discuss power, its forms and effects, and the role it plays in developing emotional competence. We, as caregivers, need to be aware of the presence and significance of our powerful role in the lives of troubled children.

Power And Its Forms

Guiding troubled youth is a tremendous opportunity, but more than that it is an awesome responsibility. A caregiver's realization of his power is both exciting and sobering.

The ability of a caregiver to achieve his purposes in work with children depends, at

times, on his capacity to impose his will on others. Max Weber defines power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons." Thus, the greater the imposition of such will, the greater the power (Galbraith, 1983 p. 2).

Gerth and Mills (Coser, 1969; Rosenberg, 1969) ascribed power to those who can influence the conduct of others even against their will. It seems willpower is inherent in the use of power. That is, the person in power asserts his will toward those who succumb to the power. The strength of this imposition is often a reflection of a strong conviction. The individual in power believes strongly in his ideas and is able to persuade others to those beliefs.

Since power implies success, it necessarily involves obedience. It is pertinent to consider why children will accept a caregiver as powerful, and why they will obey.

Personal Power

Beyond the caregiver's authority derived from the organization or his "institutionalized power," he has access to considerable personal power. If he is charming, intelligent, witty and honest, as well as articulate and even compelling, he can win submission by persuasion. Max Weber (Coser, 1969; Rosenberg, 1969 p. 141) refers to his personal power as "charisma; an extraordinary quality of a person, regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged or presumed." Thus, the governed submit because of their belief in the extraordinary quality of the specific person.

A caregiver, then, can win the attention, affection, loyalty, and obedience of his charge by effective use of his personal power. He can, for example, use humor as a means of relating to children. But, if his humorous performance is only "playing to the crowd," he is merely conforming to the group's beliefs. Then his personality has the appearance, but not the reality, of a source of power. A caregiver with true power would be able to win acceptance for his own ideas (Galbraith, 1983). He would be able, through humorous tactics, to persuade the child to accept these solutions to problems.

These powers of persuasion can be potent. So it is vital, as a caregiver, to be constantly aware of any potential misuse of this power source. There is an important distinction between using one's personal power to enhance and develop a positive identification process, and using one's charisma to appease the group.

Organizational Power

"Personality uniformly seeks the reinforcement of organization" (Galbraith, 1983 p. 46). The organization is another source of power. As a member of a treatment team, the caregiver submits to the purposes and beliefs of the organization. The team approach is not considered coercive, but necessary and functional. Positive identification is made with team members. It is easier to comply with what one believes is a benevolent authority. The use of shared decision-making as part of the treatment team encourages this identification.

Obedience is not felt as a submission to the powerful, but as proper constructive behavior of a person who freely accepts responsibilities. "It is not uncommon for people to make a virtue of the necessities they face; in that way their life situation is made more bearable for them" (Parenti, 1978 p. 123).

In addition, it's often necessary to give up dissenting approaches in order to share the burden, to support team members, or to ensure effectiveness in situations requiring consensus or cooperation. It is often necessary to fulfill the role obligations of the organization in order to make a living or advance professionally. Survival takes precedence over principles, and "without realizing it, they become the thing they oppose" (Parenti, 1978 p. 121).

When required, the caregiver submits to

the will (power) of the organization. From this submission comes the ability of the organization to impose its will externally. "On one depends the other" (Galbraith, 1983 p. 57).

In summary, obedience in a child care setting is achieved by the use of power sources: personal power and organizational power. Obedience is a possible consequence of the use of power, but not always a desired one. There are times when dissenting approaches in team treatment plans are invaluable. There are moments when a child disobeys to convey his autonomy or to display his problems in order to be helped. Positive Peer Culture programs demand greatness, responsibility, and value high expectations rather than obedience. These programs are oriented toward replacing behavior with behavior reflecting new, but basic values—the value of the human being (Vorrath, 1974; Brendtro, 1974 p. 28). Caregivers should weigh the importance of obedience and recognize the powerful ways they have in securing it.

Children And Power

In contrast to powerful adults and organizations, our troubled children must often feel lost and powerless. Alice in Wonderland conveyed a similar feeling in her conversation with a caterpillar:

> "Who are you?" said the caterpillar. Alice replied shyly, "I-I hardly know Sir, just at present - at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I must have changed several times since then" (Roth, 1970; Scroggins, 1970 p.4).

Children may feel or actually be powerless at times and wish, as Alice described, "to be a little larger." In actuality, even very young children have their own power which they discover, draw from, and continually build on.

An infant has little control over his responses. He operates by trial and error. However, before long he learns to discriminate between one set of responses and another. He discovers that he has the power to elicit certain responses from those around him. As a result, he gradually develops a repertoire of responses which are calculated to ensure physical and emotional satisfaction and punishment. Moreover, he discovers that these people have their own interests and ideas, and he develops an idea of how to use their interests for his own benefit (Dreikurs, 1968). He learns very early that he has the power to manipulate adults. In addition, feeling limited in his power, he turns to the adults in an effort to gain some personal power from them.

By the time a child's behavior is regarded as troubled, he is often a master of this fine art of manipulation. He has been taught marketable skills and attitudes and collected a set of correct and pleasing responses toward authorities. He has come to regard other people as instrumental value in the service of his own ambition, treating himself as a marketable value. He has learned to sell his personality to adults (Parenti, 1978).

These skills and attitudes contribute to a child's personal power. As the child grew, he was expected by both maturational and social demands to acquire personal power. He must be responsible for his own behavior at school, for his grades, etc. He must not look to his parents as instruments in solving all of his problems.

A child will come to a caregiver possessing some amount of personal power or lack or response to situations. He possesses power and also the potential to gain more power. But he need not use his power by imposing his will on others if he feels secure.

Young children need a sense of autonomy, a sense of worth, a feeling of power; of being able to affect the world around them. Power is even more important to the adolescent. The adolescent is expected to be more and more responsible and autonomous, but often the avenues for asserting their power are limited. Adolescents often have little

more than their peer group to turn to in their efforts to demonstrate power. Ironically, the adolescent who wishes to have influence must demonstrate competence, and he is often powerless to find ways to demonstrate this competence (Friedenberg, 1959).

Caregiver And Child: A Reciprocal Relationship

Both the caregiver and the child have power. The caregiver has numerous symbols of his power that are clearly visible to the child: keys to rooms, private offices, reports on behavior, team meetings, written rules and regulations, written rewards, support of other adults, and special adult privileges. The child, in comparison, has considerably fewer symbols of his own power. He does have his own room, privileges such as money or passes, the support (at times) of his peers, and his status within the peer group.

He can, however, exert his social power by changing his behavior in order to get what he wants. He can refuse to cooperate, communicate, and even withhold affection, apparently diminishing some of the caregiver's power. The caregiver and the child can influence each other. If a child expects the adult to have to use power, since this happened often with other adults in his past, then similarly the caregiver can often expect to have to use his power to increase his effectiveness.

In this way, there is a measure of reciprocity. In addition, it appears that the caregiver has pure superiority as leader of the child, and the child has no choice but to be passively led. Actually, the success of the caregiver/leader depends upon the surrender of the child. A personal feeling of reciprocity is required. The child must agree to be led and the caregiver must agree to lead. But all leaders are also led. A great German leader referred to his followers: "I am their leader, therefore I must follow them" (Coser, 1969; Rosenberg, 1969 p. 138).

Instruments For Exercising Power

The previous discussion has centered on the definition and sources of power for both children and caregivers. This section will discuss the instruments used in exercising power. Although these tactics will be described singly, it must be remembered that never, in the consideration of power, is there only one source or one instrument of power at work at a time (Galbraith, 1983). This section will include: force, punishment, reward, and the changing of beliefs.

Force

Caregivers having power can threaten to use force in their work with children. The threat of force is the use of their power. Specifically, their power is the ability to introduce force into a social situation, not the actual application. For example, force can be employed in enforcing rules holding specific punishments. The caregiver's power only supports his authority for upholding these rules. Unlike force, power is always successful, and when it is not successful, it is not, or ceases to be power (Coser, 1969; Rosenberg, 1969).

In this context, a caregiver remains powerful in a child's life because of the ability he has to use power. Even if he chooses to not use force or if the forceful methods he selects fail, he can remain powerful.

Example: Caregiver: Do you have homework tonight?

Child: Yes, but I don't want to do it.

Caregiver: If it's difficult, I'll be glad to help you.

Child: No, it's easy.

Caregiver: Well, it's your choice. Either you do your homework or go to bed. It's your grades that will suffer, not mine.

Child: I'll go to bed.

In this example of a power struggle, the caregiver's ultimatum (use of force) failed—the child didn't do his homework. Although

he did make a choice without protest, another intervention technique might have been more successful in motivating him to do his homework. Even though the force failed, the caregiver's power remains.

Punishment

This instrument of power, which Galbraith (1983) refers to as "condign" power, wins submission by threatening or inflicting unpleasant or painful consequences against the preferences of the individual or group. These consequences are sufficiently adverse so that these preferences are abandoned. Punishment is used to induce people to not behave in certain ways. Punishers use criticism, physical attacks, ridicule, and other more subtle variations.

In a conflict situation, a caregiver has punishment available as an instrument of power to help resolve a problem. He can choose to confront a child in a deliberate attempt to help him examine the consequences of his behavior, or he may wish to merely facilitate the child's working through his own problem-solving. Even a confrontation can be punitive and this form of punishment should not be the rationale of the confrontation. Punitive confrontation inevitably elicits either defensiveness or counterattack, and both of these are detrimental to emotional growth (Savicki & Brown, 1981).

However, if a caregiver fails to confront a child for fear of being punitive, an important moment may be lost. There are times when confrontation is necessary, and a quick, instinctive response is vital. A caregiver must assuredly use his power to end a crisis or point out unacceptable behavior. A child must clearly understand that his behavior is unacceptable and won't be tolerated. This understanding is necessary before change can be expected.

A confrontation can inform a child. These timely, realistic, yet fair appraisals help a child evaluate who he is in society. They may, at times, provide the impetus for change. If the caregiver is selective and wise, each confrontation can be a learning experience. These assessments provide society's response to the child's behavior. The older child learns he can be confronted and survive the confrontation with a better understanding of himself. These encounters may serve to build emotional competence.

Often obedience, rather than emotional growth, is the first consideration. A caregiver can confront a child and demand, under threat of punishment, that he do or say what he's told. Power is validated with these tactics, but not our lovability or worth, since we have "had to ask" (Satir, 1972 p. 90).

If caregivers consistently "have to ask" (behave punitively), the success they may achieve from the instrument of power is questionable. Obedience may be the final result, but this change of behavior is based on shaky ground. Moreover, Skinner (1971) contends a person is least free or dignified when under the threat of punishment. A person who has been punished is not simply less inclined to behave in a certain way. He, at best, learns how to behave to avoid punishment. He may avoid behavior or situations in which punishment is likely to occur. His behavior may be only maladaptive or neurotic in response; he may displace punishable behavior toward objects, he may identify or project his own tendencies onto others who engage in punishable behavior, or he may fantasize. In short, his behavior, through the use of punishment, has only been controlled.

Caregivers sensitive to the negative effects of punishment often respond by controlling and structuring the child's environment. Aggressive behavior may be handled with solitary confinement, temper tantrums may be ignored, overeating controlled by unsavory cooking. Sometimes circumstances are arranged so that behavior may occur without being punished.

Skinner (1971) contends we try to design such a world for those who cannot solve the problem of punishment for themselves. Such a world builds only automatic goodness,

Skinner continues, for if a person behaves well for the reasons we have just examined, it is the environment that must get the credit, not the person. The problem, Skinner concludes, is to induce people not to be good, but to behave well.

Reward

Certainly a reward is an inducement to behave well. This incentive is the second instrument of power which Galbraith terms "compensatory" power.

If freedom is an issue in the use of punishment, then dignity concerns positive reinl forcement. We recognize an individual's dignity or worth when we give him credit for what he has done. When someone behaves in a way we find reinforcing, we praise him so it is more likely he will do it again. Praise and approval are generally reinforcing because anyone who praises a person is inclined to reinforce him in other ways (Skinner, 1971). Moreover, there seems to be a reciprocal relationship between the two: *a natural inclination to be reinforcing to those who reinforce what we value.*

There is also a curious relationship between credit and control There is an attempt to gain credit by disguising or concealing control. This is a desire to "save face" by explaining our behavior to less visible or less powerful causes (Skinner, 1971).

In this context, it is easier for a caregiver to reinforce (praise) a group of children if the group maintained order in the caregiver's absence than if the caregiver was known to be within hearing range of the group, thus exerting an invisible control. It was natural, in this example, for the caregiver to avoid infringing on the credit due the group by controlling them inconspicuously. Thus, the caregiver's failure to use a subtle hearing-range control is an example of the use of power in increasing a child's self-worth. The caregiver was able, by his efforts, to praise the child.

Changing Of Beliefs

The last, but most complex instrument in exercising power is called "conditioned" power (Galbraith, 1983). Conditioned power is exercised by changing belief. In other words, it may be considered prevention — a means of preventing behavior by a change in attitude.

We may induce a child to change with hints, or suggestions, but we seem to be acting upon the mind when we urge or persuade. Again, a reciprocity is noted because urging and persuasion are effective only if there is already some tendency to behave (Skinner, 1971).

We cannot, as caregivers, change a child's perception of the adult as a person he can trust. The troubled child learns through past experiences that often adults cannot be trusted. We can exercise power by increasing the probability of a child's specific actions by using reinforcing behavior. That is, belief can be built when the child learns gradually, through real life experience with a caring adult, that adults can indeed be trusted. "We change behavior toward something, not an attitude toward it. We reinforce in particular ways; we do not give a person a purpose or an intention" (Skinner, 1971 p. 95).

Summary And Conclusion

The goal in working with troubled children is to help them change their behavior. This paper has described power and its forms: personal and organizational; and its instruments: punishment, reward, and belief change. It was emphasized that punishment offered a child the least freedom and dignity. Rewards (praise), in contrast, reinforced desired behavior in a positive manner, giving the child freedom and a sense of worth. Thus, the use of compensatory power has the ability to build or strengthen a child's self-image. This self-esteem is vital

in the development of the emotional competence needed to deal with life.

The greatest impact on the development of emotional competence is the use of life experiences, those reinforcing events that serve to point a child in the direction of change. For if behavior is to be changed, learning must take place. Sometimes this learning facilitates a change in beliefs. Here, in the real-time interactions of caregivers with children, is the opportunity to use conditioned power.

Power is more than the use of rewards, punishments, experiences, or personal attributes. It is a strength of mind, a quality within. It is a storehouse for the accumulation of success built upon success, sometimes necessarily preceded by failure.

A child develops emotional competence as his powerhouse builds, as his self-esteem increases and as he is continually called upon for more and more competence. His powerhouse is in a sense self-replenishing. He draws strength from it, increasing the capacity or ability to refill itself. Like a muscle, the more it is exercised, the stronger it becomes.

We have tremendous power, as caregivers, in influencing children's lives. It is vital to use this power to enhance and help build the power children need in becoming emotionally competent people. We must allow children power in their lives and, if necessary, relinquish some of our own adult power. We must, when appropriate, let children exercise their freedom of choice when the outcome is uncertain.

Bilbo, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, had trouble relinquishing the power of a ring that provided him invisibility. We can remember, as caregivers, the advice of Gandalf, the wizard, on the nature of power: "Bilbo, it has got far too much hold on you. Let it go and then you can go yourself and be free" (Tolkien, 1965 p. 59).

In this same light, Erikson (1959) asserted that the kind and degree of autonomy which parents grant their children depends on the dignity and the sense of personal independence which they derive from their own lives. Let us be generous as caregivers and, regardless of our own circumstances, allow our children power. Then let us watch continually the effect our power has on the building of emotional competence in our children.

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