

Helping Children Find Their Own Power

By Shelley Roy



Many adults today find themselves frustrated by their inability to coerce children into acting, thinking and feeling as they want them to. Parents and teachers often ask me, "How do I help my children understand that I am acting in their best interests?" Sometimes this is followed by, "It is my job as the parent/teacher to help my children learn from my mistakes." Adults who work with children have become very creative in their attempts to coerce children into *behaving* or *being good*. Yes, I said, "coerce!" No matter how kindly we may phrase our comments, "Look at how nicely Shelley is sitting." or "If you sit in the cart and are quiet in the store, I'll buy you a treat." praising, rewarding, punishing, using guilt, being the buddy,

yelling, spanking, shaming, and isolating are all forms of coercion. Coercion is the control of someone else's actions (and for me, actions include feelings and thoughts) by threatening the attainment of a higher-level desire. For example, when my mother would start a sentence with, "Young ladies just don't...." she was assuming that I wanted to be a *young lady* (a higher-level desire) and that she could get me to do what she wanted by suggesting that my present actions were keeping me from attaining that desire. The parent in the store assumes that the child desires "a treat" more than they desire being loud while being in the cart. When we use any of the forms of coercion listed above, we're playing a guessing game titled, "Can I Figure Out What You Want Without Asking?"

Most adults working with children want to empower them to make what the adults deem to be 'good choices.' Often, the problem is that we neither allow children to make any choices nor let them learn from their own mistakes. Who can tell children what to do, what is best for them, or what path they should take? We can try, but they are not likely to listen. The best teacher is experience, and once children gain knowledge through experience, they remember that, all along, we told them what to do to be successful, and they finally agree with us. As someone said to me this week, we can tell a small child that the stove is hot, we can repeat that message for days, but for some children they have no reference for 'hot' until they touch the stove. Most people don't want to be told what to do. They want to understand all aspects of a situation, and they want to experience it for themselves, so they can make their own choices. When we provide the opportunity for them to do this, we allow individuals to find their own power in their own way.

Today's children are often very wise. If you have ever interacted with them you know that they are different from previous generations. They have opinions about people and the way things work and are not afraid to share their ideas. Adults, especially those in positions of authority, often describe them as disrespectful. What we need to help them learn is how to share their thoughts in ways that others will hear and understand. If you think a child is being disrespectful, or if you are having difficulty understanding what a child is telling you, you might try saying, "If you'd like me to hear what you're saying, then perhaps you need to rephrase it, because right now I'm not hearing it. I'm not getting what you're telling me."

Children also are not shy about trying new experiences and activities in their own way, without asking for help. This is one way in which they create problems that they need help in resolving. They have a natural curiosity, and satisfying this curiosity is their way of making sense of the world around them. This natural curiosity is often coupled with seeing others as trustworthy; they know no strangers. Sadly, children must be taught that not everyone is trustworthy and strangers are not always nice people, and we need to find ways to do this that help them stay connected to being open, curious and safe. The last thing we want to do is shame and criticize children. These actions lead to developing a sense of powerlessness, and people who feel powerless try to get power by controlling others.

Many of us grew up with control-oriented parenting. Our parents saw themselves as holding the family power, and they did not consider the thought that children had their own power. This system was hard for

us to tolerate when we were growing up, but it helped us search for new and different ways to parent our own children. We know too well how difficult the transition to adulthood was when we grew up being told we were powerless and then were thrust into a world in which we needed to be powerful in order to survive. Our focus with our children has been to help them find their own power and learn to use it effectively.

Many of us are committed to raising powerful children because we know that, when their generation inherits the world, they will not feel the need to dominate or control others to feel powerful. When we coerce children, we teach them that coercing others is okay. We teach what we **DO**, not what we PREACH. When we ask questions and remember to *pull from within*, we empower those around us. We can gently guide our children to find their own internal power; we can provide them with our time, energy and advice in thoughtful and empowering ways. I believe that what we all want is to create a powerful generation of adults who know their power and how to use it wisely. We want to create world of peace.

Some of the ideas in this article are based on the work of Jennifer Hoffman www.rielheals.com