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978-0-521-76137-6 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

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THE NEW AUTHORITY

Family, School, and Community

Dr. Haim Omer builds on his previous work to present a new model of authority for parents, teachers, and community workers that is suitable for today's free and pluralistic societies. This new authority contrasts with traditional authority in that it emphasizes self-control and persistence over control of the child, a network of support over a strict hierarchy, taking mutual responsibility for escalations over holding the child solely responsible, patience over threats, nonviolent resistance over physical force, and transparency over secrecy. In addition to a thorough discussion of the underlying theory, *The New Authority* presents a practical program for families, schools, and communities. Dr. Omer provides specific instructions to combat violence and risky behavior at home and in school, increase parent and teacher interest and support, and implement interventions that increase safety, improve atmosphere, and generate community cohesiveness.

Haim Omer is Professor of Psychology at Tel-Aviv University. He is the author of *Critical Interventions in Psychotherapy; Constructing Therapeutic Narratives* (with Nahi Alon); *Parental Presence; Nonviolent Resistance: A New Approach to Violent and Self-destructive Children*; and *The Psychology of Demonization* (with Nahi Alon, with a foreword by the Dalai Lama). He also has published articles in *Family Process; Journal of Marital and Family Therapy; Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology; American Journal of Psychiatry; Psychotherapy Research; Journal of Family Therapy; American Journal of Psychotherapy; British Journal of Psychiatry; Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice; Familiendynamik*; and *Psychotherapie in Dialog*. Dr. Omer's books have been translated into Dutch, Japanese, Hebrew, French, Portuguese, and German. He routinely lectures in Europe on nonviolent resistance and on the new authority.

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Translated from the Hebrew by

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FOREWORD

The main purpose of this book is to answer the question: What kind of adult authority is appropriate for a free and pluralistic society, and how can it be achieved?

The breakdown of parental and educational authority in the past decades is one of the causes of the dramatic rise in violence and delinquency among children and teens. However, parents and educators justifiably are deterred by a kind of authority that is based on intimidation, blind obedience, and brutal force. The conflict between the desire to restore their authority and the need to adjust it to current social values creates a dilemma for parents and educators: How can they exercise their authority while maintaining the values of autonomy and cultural pluralism?

In this book, Haim Omer presents a theoretical and practical solution for that dilemma by the concept of *the new authority*. This concept is the product of a long and multifaceted process of thought and action. The beginning of the process can be traced to the publication ten years ago of the book *Restoring Parental Authority*,¹ his first book on parenting. That book set off a lively public debate. When the book was published, the concept of *authority* was almost considered indecent in public-therapeutic discourse, and connecting it with parenting drew a lot of misunderstanding. The concept often

¹ This is the Hebrew title. The English title is: *Parental Presence: Reclaiming a Leadership Role in Bringing Up Our Children* (Omer, 2000).

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was misconstrued as advocating a demanding and tough style of parenting, insufficiently attuned to the child's needs.

Despite the concept's difficult labor pains, the understanding that parental authority not only is legitimate and positive, but is actually a necessary precondition for a healthy relationship between parent and child, has begun to permeate public awareness. The concept of *parental presence*, which constituted the central axis of the book, helped parents restore their authority in keeping with moral values and attunement to the child.

Omer's second book on parenting, *Nonviolent Resistance: A New Approach to Violent and Self-destructive Children*, describes the escalation processes that occur between parents and children and provides guidelines for preventing them. The book combines a theoretical rationale based on the philosophy of nonviolent resistance with a concrete plan of action for parents on how to resist and how to protect their children from escalation, violence, and self-risk.

The point of departure both in *Restoring Parental Authority* and *Nonviolent Resistance* is recognition and understanding of the parents' distress, while challenging the common tendency to almost automatically blame the parents for their children's behavior. A similar process characterized Omer's work with schools, where he emphasized the overwhelming difficulties facing teachers and educators, and built a program centered on the teacher's presence and positive authority.

Parent involvement in the schools is one of the challenges currently facing the education system. Teachers and principals often are on the defensive against parents' threats, accusations, and, sometimes, violence. Their understandable fear of parents' reactions often leads to a policy of concealment, which provides a fertile ground for the spread of violence. However, just like the desire to restore the old authority is not realistic, the desire to close the school to parents is not feasible either. Therefore, a way has to be found for parents and teachers to work together.

The principles of the new authority, one of whose pillars is the parent-teacher alliance, offer a way out of the impasse. With their

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help, teachers begin to experience parental presence in the school as supportive and empowering, while parents become able to let go of their suspicion and hostility toward the teacher and the school. This mutual buttressing gradually attracts the collaboration of additional community agencies. In this way, the spirit of the new authority begins to spread beyond the boundaries of the home and the school.

Constructing the new authority is not a totally uniform course of action, requiring full agreement between all involved parties; to the contrary: One of the main strengths of the concept is its modularity. Each party can make a change at its own pace and in its own way, and it is not necessary for each and every strategy to be homogeneously implemented to achieve results. A parent or teacher can begin restoring authority “in small.” However, the very structure of the new authority ensures that once the process begins, the parents empower not only themselves but also the teachers; teachers empower not only themselves but also the parents; and both empower the community at large.

Omer did not do the work described in this book all by himself. He was supported by a group of professionals who work with him and under his guidance. Therefore, most of the chapters of the book list the authors who were responsible for the projects described in them.

The first chapter presents the concept of the new authority; how it contrasts with traditional authority in its assumptions, aims, and methods; and how it creates a different frame of relating and a different experience for the adult and the child.

The second chapter introduces the concept of *vigilant care* and provides guidelines for parents, specifying what they need to know (and what not!), how to know it, how to avoid spying, and how to intervene. Vigilant care is a central pillar of the new authority, and the concept recurs throughout the book. This chapter touches on basic issues such as privacy, trust, and legitimization.

The third chapter presents guidelines for dealing with violent children in the home. It shows parents how to overcome their passivity and protect themselves, the home, the siblings, and the violent

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child himself, while also diminishing impulsive reactions on both sides.

The fourth chapter is about strengthening teachers in the spirit of the new authority. The teachers' authority is no longer the individual power of a "strongman" but the product of a network of support. The chapter describes ways to garner support for the teacher by other teachers, the school administration, and the parents. The chapter shows how teachers can learn to speak in the language of "we" instead of "I."

The fifth chapter describes measures and procedures to construct presence and vigilant care in the school in the spirit of the new authority. Ways are detailed for increasing teacher presence in the classroom, the schoolyard, and the school entrances, in ways that bolster the students' and teachers' sense of security and belonging.

The sixth chapter presents the use of transparency and reparation acts as effective alternatives to punishment or verbal persuasion.

The seventh chapter focuses on recruiting and including students in the struggle against violence. Building the new authority among the teachers paves the way for a new kind of alliance with the children, breaking down the walls between the two camps, and empowering the children's community.

The last chapter is about the new authority in the community at large. The projects described in the chapter demonstrate the mobilization of a kibbutz, village, or town, in its struggle against anti-social behaviors such as loitering, alcoholism, sexual harassment, brawling, and delinquency. The broad response to these projects shows that the new authority approach can help reawaken a dormant community spirit.

I believe that a significant implication of the concept of the new authority presented in this book is to modulate the absolute value of individualism and the unchecked sanctification of privacy in our society. These values carry a price: They may lead to alienation, leaving children vulnerable and alone, without effective adult presence in their lives. The principles of the new authority help to renew the

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community spirit, creating a legitimate basis for its positive and protective involvement with its individual members. Besides curbing extreme actions, this involvement bolsters the feeling of belonging of children and adults alike.

The definition of the new authority and the ways to build it summarize our team's work in the past fifteen years. To stimulate dialogue on these concepts, we established the Web site www.newauthority.net. This site also provides information on activities, training, and workshops on the new authority for parents, schools, and communities.

Idan Amiel

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