

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 THE NEW AUTHORITY

"Teachers used to have authority!" "Parents used to be parents!" "I respected my father!" "The teachers we had in our childhood were teachers!" Expressions like these, regarding authority as we once knew it, imply that until things return to their former state, there will be no remedy for the problems of education. Indeed, traditional authority has been severely undermined; however, today's social conditions will not allow a return to its former state. This authority enjoyed the unconditional support of most elements of society. Almost everybody agreed that parents and teachers should be obeyed simply because they were parents and teachers. Public opinion, as well as the educational, religious, media, and legal establishment, endorsed this outlook. This all but unanimous support no longer exists. Many now consider traditional authority as illegitimate and some of its central props, such as corporal punishment, distance, awe, unconditional obedience, and immunity from criticism have become morally unacceptable. Consequently, we cannot and do not wish to restore traditional authority to its former status. Most attempts to do so have negative effects, because without a broad social base the only way this kind of authority can subsist is by the exercise of naked power and the induction of fear.

Liberal society was not content with criticism, and at a certain stage even called into question the very role of authority in education. *Authority* became a negative term, indicating a pernicious form of relation that was viewed as the chief cause of most individual

and social ills. In the 1960s and 1970s, the ideology that sought to eliminate all use of authority in child rearing reached a wide influence. Education based on authority was largely believed to warp natural growth. It was posited that parents and teachers should limit themselves to the provision of warmth, understanding, and encouragement, abstaining from any kind of enforcement. The child was supposed to grow up in complete freedom, unhampered by extraneous demands and impositions. This viewpoint influenced most psychologists, educators, and popular authors, becoming one of the most ambitious visions in the history of educational thinking. Hopes ran high that this was the sure way to raise healthy, spontaneous, and sociable children, and of regenerating society as a whole. Any negative development in the child was attributed to the repression of spontaneous growth. A violent child was viewed as irrefutable proof that his parents were violent; if he had learning difficulties, that he had been oppressed by his teachers; and if he had emotional problems, that his natural tendencies had been suppressed. The remedy for all these ills was the removal of authority's harmful influences. This dream was soon shattered by reality.

Since the early 1980s, many studies¹ have indicated that children who are raised permissively are characterized by higher levels of violence, dropping out, drug use, delinquency, and sexual promiscuity. These children also suffer from lower self-esteem. This final finding came as a surprise, even to the researchers. It might have been expected that children raised with no restrictions would have difficulty with structured settings, but how could one explain the poor self-image in children who, according to the prevailing ideology, were showered with encouragement and praise? We must understand that self-esteem does not develop solely from positive feedback. This is surely important, but the development of self-esteem also is rooted in our experience in overcoming difficulties. In the course of normal development, children are faced with challenging

¹ For a summary, see Steinberg (2001).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The New Authority

3

situations, such as the transition to school and the need to accept discipline. At first, some of these tasks may seem very difficult to the child. For example, a child entering nursery school may feel that he cannot be far from his parents and the familiar home setting. Despite the difficulty, the great majority of children succeed in this task. Remaining in nursery school becomes for them a developmental achievement. However, children raised in a strictly permissive ideology do not accumulate similar experiences, for the ruling educational principle states that if the child suffers or refuses to make the transition, the obstacle must be removed. These children may suffer from a peculiar kind of deprivation: that of experiences that teach them to endure. Without this their self-image may lack a "backbone."

The undermining of traditional authority and the failure of the permissive dream created a new problem for educators: how to fill the vacuum created by the collapse of authority, so as to provide children with constructive experiences in limits, demands, and the need to cope, in a manner that is acceptable and legitimate in the context of a more democratic society. Our answer to this question is the concept of the *new authority*.

The characteristics of the type of authority that we no longer accept are clear to most of us. On the other hand, we do not have any clear picture of a different, new kind of authority. This is not surprising because our generation is perhaps the first to be squarely faced with this problem. We cannot expect that this new picture of authority will emerge full-blown and ready to use. We will have to develop it gradually, groping for it out of our needs, wishes, and limitations. In this process we will have to define the principles that guide this new authority, the acts that define it, and the ways in which it is communicated.

Most parents and professionals in the area of education will agree that *presence* is a good starting point for the new authority. Increasing presence enables the restoration of parental authority in a positive manner for parent and child alike (Omer, 2000). The child

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

experiences parental presence when the parent acts in a manner that conveys the message,

"I am your parent and remain your parent! Even when it's hard for you and it's hard for me, you can't fire me, divorce me, get rid of me, or shut me up!"

In this process, the child may come to feel she has a parent in the full sense of the word. The parent, in turn, may conquer the feeling of having forfeited his place. As we see here, the same is true for teachers and pupils.

The notion that authority is acquired by presence is quite uncharacteristic for traditional authority. Actually, the traditional perception of authority was associated with distance. A common opinion reflecting this view is: *"The children don't obey her because she's too close to them."* The belief that closeness conflicts with authority led to social measures aimed at separating the authority figure from her subordinates. This outlook is no longer acceptable. The new authority must be based on presence and proximity, not on distance and awe. However, proximity and presence should not blur the distinction between the role of the parent or teacher and that of the child. The presence of the parent or the teacher should be unique to parents and teachers, and thus differ from the presence of a friend. Authority should become apparent in its responsible role, manifesting concern and supervision, and not in a cheap chummy manner.

In contrast to traditional authority, the sources of validation and support for the new authority are not self-evident. Parents and teachers are no longer automatically backed by virtue of their roles. Hence, to build a new authority, we have to provide it with new sources of support and validation. In our work with parents, we help them develop a support network made up of family, friends, teachers and, sometimes, parents of the children with whom their child associates. The support network generates profound changes in the way the parents act and are perceived. From now on, parental measures no longer reflect the decisions they make as individuals, but actions

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)**The New Authority**

5

with a social echo and functional backup. The need to enlist support also impacts on the nature of parental actions. In our society, one cannot enlist widespread support for aggressive or arbitrary demonstrations of authority; hence, the very act of enlisting support imparts a dimension of control over parental actions. In our program to restore parental authority, the parents make a commitment to their support group that they will abstain from any violent or humiliating behavior toward the child. In this way, the support group guarantees that the new authority will not be arbitrary, as traditional authority sometimes was. The same applies to teachers. Our program to restore the authority of teachers includes recruiting support from their colleagues, parents, and the school administration. As is seen here, teachers who follow the precepts of the new authority also succeed in gaining the support of the great majority of pupils. Support for teachers is of course not unconditional. Teachers are entitled to it when they intensify their presence, when they abstain from humiliating measures, and when they firmly oppose violence and chaos. Under these conditions, teachers can benefit from wide support, which considerably changes their status.

The authority figure of the past did not feel responsible for escalatory processes. When the interaction with the child became raucous or violent, it was assumed that the child was to blame. The parent or teacher felt obliged to respond to force with force. The relationship between adult and child was asymmetric, only the authority figure had the right to apply physical force. Today, we condemn all use of physical force, *especially* when applied by parents or teachers. The asymmetry still exists, but in the opposite direction! The person in authority is expected to abstain from any violent reaction, even when the child is flagrantly violent. In our view, the asymmetry is even more pronounced: The representative of the new authority should not only eschew any use of physical force, but also should act unilaterally so as to reduce escalation. He must firmly resist the child's negative behavior, without being drawn into a vicious cycle of shouts and threats. Developing the ability to display resolve without escalation is surprising and gratifying. When teachers realize that they

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

no longer need to strike back on the spot, and are trained to react in a decided but controlled manner, they benefit from emotional relief and from a reinforcement of their authority. Our research has shown that the acquisition of skills in avoiding escalation reduces friction and sharp reactions by parents and by teachers, while also bolstering their authority (Omer et al., 2006; Weinblatt and Omer, 2008).

Traditionally, the source of authority was the formal status of the authority figure. The father of the family was allowed to do as he pleased in his home, with no need to justify his actions to others. Questioning the way he chose to discipline his children was seen as an affront to his authority. Any attempt by family members to talk outside about what went on inside the house was viewed as a crass betrayal. In contrast, we now view transparency in the use of authority as absolutely vital. Transparency, however, can be more than only a limitation, becoming a major source of legitimate power for the representatives of the new authority. This is so because the demands of transparency can also be seen as valid for the violent acts of children and adolescents. In our program, the parents' and teachers' support group receives updates on the child's violent behavior. This group now constitutes a kind of "public opinion" with a double effect regarding both the adult's and the child's violence: It reinforces the adult's commitment while also creating group pressure on the child to refrain from violence. Lifting the veil of secrecy is not easy for parents, who fear that exposure could be harmful to the child or the family. In order to overcome this apprehension, we emphasize to parents that concealing the child's violence is tantamount to its perpetuation. Parents who opt to keep the child's violence a secret are, in effect, partners to it. The same applies, of course, to violent acts by the parents themselves: Concealing them perpetuates them. This principle guides our work with families and schools. Thus, we encourage the school to make public all violent events (and the remedial action taken), without mentioning the names of the children involved. The school also must adopt a policy of transparency concerning abuse of teacher authority. As is seen here, our policy

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The New Authority

7

of restoring the parent–teacher alliance allows teachers to adopt this policy without a sense of unilateral threat.

The commitment to self-examination highlights another essential difference between the old and the new authority. The authority figure of the past was always “right.” Everyone knew, of course, that this was not the case, but nobody dared to speak up. This situation was immortalized in the fable of the emperor’s new clothes. Today, however, any attempt by an authority figure to maintain a countenance of infallibility will be ludicrous from the very start. Not only the child, but the entire public will cry out that the emperor has no clothes. Hence, the new authority entails a willingness to acknowledge errors and to take remedial action. The authority figure no longer represents purported perfection, but is clearly flesh and blood, requiring time for thought, help in making decisions, and the opportunity to correct mistakes. The parents’ willingness to admit and correct errors improves the family climate, broadens the relationship with the child, and reinforces their authority as people of principle.² Today’s teachers also must acknowledge that they are not immune to error. In any case, the critical atmosphere that characterizes a more democratic society ensures that their mistakes will be exposed. Teachers who understand this can transform their vulnerability into an asset, by setting a personal example in the form of admitting to mistakes and being willing to correct them. This stance can become one of the characteristics of the new authority that contribute most to its leadership.

Perhaps the most profound difference between the old and the new authority lies in the relationship between authority and compliance. Traditionally, there was a perfect overlap between authority and obedience: The level of authority equaled the level of obedience. This equation is problematic in a more democratic society because, so conceived, authority is incompatible with the development of autonomy. However, authority can be understood in a way that leaves room for autonomy. The fact that an individual has been

² See Alon and Omer (2006, pp. 148–152).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13776-8 - The New Authority: Family, School, and Community

Haim Omer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

granted authority does not necessarily mean that the people subject to it are obedient. What defines the authority is not the degree of obedience, but the fact that some relevant sectors of society have authorized this person to discharge her duties and to act in accordance with the dictates of the role. This person's authority is thus defined not in terms of the degree of obedience, but in terms of the "authorization" she receives, that is, the legitimization, support, and resources granted for fulfilling the task. An individual who succeeds in making use of these means and, if necessary, demanding additional ones, has authority. None of the above makes any reference to obedience; but clearly, a person with extensive authority, who has proven her ability to use her power well, will bring about changes in the reactions of people for whom she has responsibility. Thus, the authority of parents and teachers will be reinforced when they are given the tools, legitimacy, and support of the environment. This insight eliminates the problematic equation between authority and obedience. Parents and teachers can be authoritative, regardless of the extent to which a child obeys. Far from being merely a verbal ploy, this position drastically changes the authority figure's attitude to the child and to the scope of her authority. Parents and teachers now know that they have no control over the child; they only can control themselves and the resources at their disposal. Their authority manifests itself when they conscientiously use the means at their disposal, so as to best fulfill their responsibility.

At first glance, most of the distinctions that we have noted between the two kinds of authority seem to reflect a series of limitations suffered by new authority: It relinquishes the privileges of distance, infallibility, and physical force; accepts responsibility for preventing escalation; is exposed to criticism; and surrenders the illusion of control. Nevertheless, these seeming limitations can become sources of strength. They relieve those in authority from their loneliness, freeing them from the compulsion to triumph, and to retaliate when provoked. Although the traditional authority figure felt compelled again and again to protect his honor, the new one is free to decline any invitation to an imagined duel. Furthermore, instead of fearing

The New Authority

9

the ubiquitous eye of criticism, the new authority figure openly turns to his support network, turning transparency into an asset, and using public opinion to legitimize his steps. In this way he gains a freedom of movement that was all but inconceivable for the authority of yore.

THE EXPERIENCE OF AUTHORITY IN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The experience of the new authority entails changes not only in the external behavior, but also in the inner discourse, the emotions, and even the physical sensations of parents and teachers. The authority figure begins to *radiate authority*, because she now senses it in herself. We became aware of these processes from reports by parents and teachers, who were surprised by their new feelings:

A mother who staged a sit-in³ with her violent 10-year-old son told us, even before there was any discernible change in his behavior: “*I don’t believe it! I sat in the lion’s den for a whole hour, and didn’t budge! I feel that I exist!*”

The mother of hyperactive twin boys told us: “*In the past, when I got home from work and saw them jumping in front of the television, I would quietly sneak into my room to get some rest. I would flatten myself against the wall, barely saying hello so they wouldn’t notice me. Nowadays I walk straight across the room, go over to them, ask what they’re watching and tell them that I’m going to rest for half an hour and will prepare their meal right after it!*”

The report of a teacher, after the teachers in the school made a joint decision about dealing with lateness and committed themselves to helping each other: “*I felt that I was speaking not only with my own voice, but with that of all the teachers! I felt like a chorus!*”

The report of a mother, a woman of heavy build: “*The sit-in made me feel that I carry weight! My son tried to push me away and I didn’t*

³ The technique of the sit-in is described in Chapter 3.

budge! That was the first time in my life I wasn't sorry that I didn't go on a diet!"

The father of a 13-year-old boy, who felt that his son was ignoring him, told us that the boy managed to evade the sit-in by slipping out through the window: *"I couldn't just let him run away like that! So I lay down on his bed and fell asleep. I don't remember when I've slept so well lately! When he came back he was stunned to see me there!"* This brings to mind the story of Goldilocks and the three bears. We can imagine the boy's astonishment: *"Who's been sleeping in my bed???"*

**EXPERIENCING FAILURE IN TRYING TO RESTORE
 TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY**

In the absence of the widespread support that they had in the past, many parents and teachers who try to reclaim their authority feel as though they have no choice but to assume an aggressive stance. They think in terms such as *strong-weak* or *winner-loser*, or expressions such as: *"If I don't punish him, he'll think that he won!"* *"This child only understands force!"* *"It's either him or me!"* These statements express the belief that the relationship between the authority figure and the child is a *zero-sum game*.

The sense of urgency that overtakes the teacher or the parent who is struggling to restore lost authority reflects the fear that only one small step lies between triumph and disaster. This feeling underlies the wish to *"show him once and for all!"* as well as the anguish that *"if I don't show him, that's the end of me!"* Every confrontation now becomes a matter of life and death, in which the slightest hesitation may signal total collapse. Feeling compelled to deter or subdue, the teacher or parent tenses his back, jaw, and body muscles to their breaking point. He injects his voice with pent-up rage so as to convey the enormity of the punishment about to descend on the insolent child, unless he gives in with no further ado. He does this, however, with a queasy feeling in the pit of the stomach, knowing full well