

The Personal Side of Power

by Bonnie Neugebauer

When we began this project on power struggles, we were grappling with accounts and images of violence: stories of younger and younger children acting and reacting aggressively, life and death played out in gory detail in films and video games, grim statistics of disparate realities based on race and culture, global conflicts playing out disputes from long ago. We wanted to explore ways of nurturing negotiation skills and shaping perceptions of power in even very young children so that they will grow to adulthood understanding that real power is grounded in community with others, that exercising power over others is inevitably destructive to all. We wanted to offer teachers, parents, and ourselves a pathway to hope.

First, however, we must lay the groundwork. How can we work with young children if we are not conscious of and working on the power issues in our own lives? Can people who feel powerless help children negotiate power struggles? Is it possible for people who think of themselves as victims to empower others?

Our personal issues will be reflected in our work with children, so it is imperative that we constantly strive to better know ourselves. How determined are you to win every argument? What strategies do you use for defusing conflict? Do you avoid or fear what is new? Do you enjoy debate? Do differences make you uncomfortable? When we begin to understand the power struggles in our own lives, we focus on our behaviors, confront our isms, and begin to learn new skills — the skills that reflect our beliefs. We are then more able to greet children thoughtfully and with open hearts.

Power seems huge out there — not intimate, daily, personal. But we struggle with power every day in very personal ways: who decides what to eat for breakfast, when to leave for work, what route you will take, or what you will be doing when you get there? Decisions are made with us or for us. Choices are offered or denied.

Focusing on the role power plays in our lives is a fascinating exercise. When I began thinking about power issues, I asked several friends if they felt powerful. At

first they seemed surprised to find themselves discussing this issue. Here are some of their comments:

- “I can’t think of any situation where I feel powerful.”
- “I can’t think of any point in my life in which I’ve felt powerful.”
- “I only feel powerful when I’m shopping. The power of choosing something and taking it home with me feels great.”
- “I feel like I’ve given away all the power in my life. Someone else makes the decisions and I follow along. It never feels like it’s my turn.”

It’s so easy to abdicate power, to feel that it is out of our ability to control — especially, perhaps, for women.

Focusing on Where Power Sources

We must begin by trying to understand where and when we feel powerful. For me the most powerful moments are when I can feel that something is working. When I am brainstorming, most often with my partners Roger and Bruce, and the ideas start to flow and I know that they are good ideas, worthy of consideration, I feel terrific. When someone tells me that an idea we have shared has worked for them, it’s a high. When I know, by reaction or evaluation, that I have done a right thing, made a good decision, offered a helpful insight, then I feel powerful.

But power is more than a feeling — it is a force. And it is not always created internally. Much of the power at work in the world is generated and exercised externally by historical precedent, social climate, institutionalized power bases.

When I asked for power stories most recently, my daughter Alison, a home visitor for Early Head Start in Chicago who has enrolled at the University of Chicago in a masters in social work program, responded:

Bonnie Neugebauer is editor of *Child Care Information Exchange*.

“Last night in class (and almost every night basically), I felt incredibly powerless regarding my work; I feel like I have been doing everything wrong. Professors are great about giving us questions and things to think about — but no answers! The more knowledge I have, the more powerless I feel. It feels like ignorance is bliss.

“Last night, we discussed how as social workers and community members each of us needs to confront our own biases and recognize that we are supporting all the isms that exist in society. I am society. In all my interactions with people, I must recognize my biases and understand how my interactions reinforce those biases. So does that make it impossible to work with someone of a different ethnicity, age, or culture?

“Am I exerting my white power just by the nature of my relationship with African-American moms? I have thought that I was being helpful in advocating for them by going to the public aid office with someone or making a phone call, but was I also perpetuating white dominance and power? This is not clear to me. But, basically, I do understand that in order to communicate with people we must first examine ourselves and try to understand ourselves and recognize how our biases affect our behavior and interactions.”

As we work with others, we will inevitably find ourselves, at least on occasion, in a maelstrom of struggles and power issues that we didn’t create but which we have inherited. And we must slog our way through them. In Alison’s story, I hear her struggling to find the power with place from which she can support others without taking something from them or perpetuating forces she finds abhorrent.

A director shared this story: “I worked with one teacher long past the time when I knew I should let her go. She wasn’t ineffective; she just didn’t have the spark and energy the job requires. But I knew she had huge financial and family problems — the job was her basis of power. She was using it to solve the challenges in her life, so how could I take that away from her?

“I discussed this with a colleague who counseled me: ‘You obviously feel that you are helping her; but if she isn’t doing a good job, you really aren’t. What you are doing is making her dependent on you, rather than on herself. Ultimately that isn’t good for her because she isn’t being empowered in any real sense.’”

A middle school teacher has a story that everyone in social services can identify with: “Alex was a great kid,

enthusiastic, helpful. He wasn’t the greatest student, but he was always there, every day. He liked to talk with me and he would wait for me to arrive in the morning or walk with me between classes. Then, one day, he didn’t show up; in fact, I didn’t see him for several days.

“When Alex returned to school, he had a black eye and a swollen cheek. From running into a door, he said. But later in the day, he told me that his father had hit him. Of course I had to call Child Protective Services. I was with him as they took photos and interviewed him.

“It turned out that this wasn’t the first time — in fact, it was the sixth time that CPS had been called in — but the injury was judged insufficient to warrant intervention. Nothing happened. I felt totally powerless. In truth, I felt that by doing what I had to do I had probably made things worse for Alex.”

Focusing on Power Issues

When we bring our power issues out into the open, we invite other perspectives and a sharing of stories. Talking gives us other, perhaps new ways of looking at some of the important issues we must deal with. By being conscious of power issues as they relate to our professional lives and our programs, we can put personal power to good use to energize what happens for staff, families, and children.

If we know what makes a person feel powerful, we know more about how to motivate that person, and also how to demotivate them. If we know what empowers us, we can use this information to create environments and opportunities where we can better achieve our own purposes.

■ We know two brothers. One is very visible in the community. He’s outspoken; he’s a politician. The other brother is also outspoken, but more privately. He is the speechwriter, the person who gives the politician the words that enable him to talk about his ideas. Which is more powerful?

■ Two countries struggle at war. Each tempts the support of a third neutral country. Is it more powerful to fight or to remain neutral?

■ We all feel powerless when we are frustrated, tired, confused, or worried. We feel vulnerable when we don’t know the rules. When someone seems impervious, are they really, or are they just acting the part?

Power issues are not the same for all people. What is a challenge for one person gets another's juices flowing, and is overwhelming for yet another. If we are working together as a staff or a community, we need to know this about each other. How do we initiate the dialog? How do we get people to talk about their feelings and expectations, their experiences of power and weakness?

Focusing on Power Issues at Work

Often we rely on the same techniques for brainstorming, the same procedures for staff meetings, the same routines of relating to people. It may be easier that way, but let's try to shake things loose:

■ In thinking about what we could do at Exchange to create effective tools for staff training, we remembered the Anti-Coloring Books that first appeared when our children were young, and we designed the Anti-Ordinary Thinkbook (Exchange Press, 1991) as a tool to be used in staff workshops and meetings to help break the ice, to get people thinking in new directions, and to give them an opportunity to enjoy their creative energy.

One of the exercises is specifically related to power: it directs staff to write about a situation in which they have felt powerful (perhaps confining it to their workday). Or they might be encouraged to draw a picture depicting a certain time of day when they feel most powerful. Hopefully, besides encouraging some laughter and a spirit of playfulness, this exercise will get staff talking about their own power issues. It might lead to discussion of the environment, or relationships, or procedures.

■ A magnet serves as an intriguing symbol for power. A magnet has no usable power unless it is in close contact with another magnet (which it repels) or a metal object (which it attracts). It has incredible power potential, but it can also be powerless. Like a human being — drawing others in or pushing them away; accepting ideas and challenges or rejecting them; powerful in certain situations, powerless in others.

Think of your weakest employee and imagine that person as a magnet. In what situations does this employee repel people or challenges? What context can you create for that person so that he attracts people or ideas? Can you envision power growing within this staff member? Can you imagine him generating power in others?

Is it really the magnet itself, or is it the magnetic force between objects that holds the real power? Magnets are

able to magnetize certain other objects, turning them into magnets as well. These are useful images for thinking about the power in groups and about power with issues, as contrasted with power over.

Bonnie's Power Theory of Motivation: People/teachers will be drawn to a working environment in which they sense a place of power for themselves. People/teachers will be committed to stay in a working environment where they feel powerful.

Focusing on Context

Power can only be exercised and/or experienced in relationship to other people or things. Teachers can feel and be powerful in relationship with director, co-workers, parents, children, and community in an environment which is comprised of time, space, and physical objects.

Teachers need to feel good about themselves and the work they do. They need a positive attitude to hold them through the day. They need the opportunity to be creative and to effect change. They need to experience success. They need to feel valued as individuals.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Promote exercise and sound nutrition
- ✓ Don't work people so hard that they are used up or burned out
- ✓ Build into your program a respect for and attention to people's minds and bodies
- ✓ Be sensitive to issues of helping so that we know when to help and when not to, so that we don't belittle or take power away in our efforts to do good
- ✓ Assign tasks appropriate to the individual
- ✓ Provide opportunities for special skills and talents to be shared

Teachers need to feel powerful in relationship with their leader. They need to know they are respected, valued, appreciated. They need to feel ownership, allegiance, influence. They need to feel that the director recognizes their unique contributions and talents.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Really listen, not only with our ears, but with our minds, hearts, and time as well
- ✓ Remember past discussions and experiences so that staff know they have an impact and history is being created
- ✓ Put ideas into action — let staff make their ideas come to life

- ✓ Ask questions rather than giving answers
- ✓ Share decisionmaking

Teachers need to feel powerful in relationship with their peers. They need to feel that they are important to the team, that their contributions are critical to quality, that others enjoy working with them.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Work on building teams
- ✓ Engage staff in the mission of the program
- ✓ Allow room for differences
- ✓ Value diversity of perspective, experience, culture
- ✓ Give staff room to solve their own problems
- ✓ Encourage staff to depend on each other
- ✓ Be open; share information
- ✓ Encourage laughter
- ✓ Promote community-building
- ✓ Create a special language of words or signals

Teachers need to feel powerful in relationship to parents. As teachers and parents feel their way towards partnerships, power struggles can be dissipated when all parties envision power as something they share together.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Provide ongoing training so staff feel knowledgeable and competent
- ✓ Work on communication skills
- ✓ Build in opportunities for families to express appreciation
- ✓ Record classroom, program, child, staff histories
- ✓ Provide timely, useful, frequent feedback
- ✓ Foster a sense of professionalism

Teachers need to feel powerful in their community. It's great to feel pride at work, but it's also important to feel pride about work. Teachers need to feel respected in the community for the work they do on it's behalf.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Nurture their feelings of pride and identification with your program
- ✓ Create situations in which teachers see themselves as experts
- ✓ Encourage opportunities for staff to enjoy each other
- ✓ Promote attendance at conferences
- ✓ Offer training and opportunities for giving presentations
- ✓ Participate in advocacy efforts as a group and as individuals

- ✓ Treat staff as professionals by offering the best wages and benefits possible

Teachers need to feel powerful in relationship with children. When teachers feel they are making a difference in the lives of children and families, they will be empowered to do their best and to continually refine their skills. They should know they are important; help them to see that it is so.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Help teachers receive the signals children send back to them
- ✓ Give them opportunities to share their stories
- ✓ Encourage them to keep records/histories of the children and their growth
- ✓ Train them to recognize skills needing improvement

Teachers need to feel powerful in relationship to their environment. Teachers need to control, shape, redefine the environment in which they work. The environment should reflect their personalities as well as those of the children. The environment should record the stories of the work that adults and children are engaged in together.

How can we nurture staff?

- ✓ Allow the environment to reflect individual personalities
- ✓ Encourage staff to effect change
- ✓ Focus on what is unique to each classroom, what distinguishes your program as a whole
- ✓ Thoughtfully document projects and display stories
- ✓ Make sure that everyone has choices
- ✓ Clarify the rules

If we strive to understand ourselves and others in the context of power, there is much to learn. Change is possible, communities can be built, problems become challenges, difficulties become opportunities for growth.

If we can give up ideas of power as something bestowed or taken away, we come to realize that we can empower ourselves and, by so doing, empower others. When power becomes a force created in relationship, strengthened by partnership and community, then the old win-lose images fade away. If we come to see ourselves as people who are strong and creative and important, the children in our care will learn to see themselves as people who can work things out and find new solutions. We will have empowered the changemakers of our future.