

### **Book Review: Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles**

In my work as a clinical psychologist, I have been struck by well meaning parents who misguidedly refute their child's internal experiences. Holding onto incomplete versions of their children as individuals, parents foreclose discovering who their kids are in favor of assuaging their own angst about what will be. When they are encouraged to consider how their own powerful desire to protect silences the complex emotional responses of their children, parents flat out reject this notion as irrelevant, frivolous and critical. At times, further exploration risks upsetting an emerging therapeutic alliance. In such instances, books can be helpful in delineating how enhanced parental self-awareness leads to an improved capacity to support healthy development in children.

Mary Sheedy Kurchinka is a licensed family educator and author of several books including: *Kids, Parents and Power Struggles*.<sup>1</sup> In my view, this book has the potential to facilitate meaningful clinical work with families. Relying on the book *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Kurchinka argues improved awareness of our feelings, as well as those of others, significantly alters ones capacity to arrive at reasonable solutions to otherwise entrenched and repetitive interpersonal power struggles. Kurchinka frames perennial childhood behavior problems as intractable surface level interactions between parents and children, best addressed by assessing the underlying feeling states of both parties.

According to Kurchinka, power struggles are about feelings and needs of children and parents alike. For me, this notion resonates with clinical training and experience. In practice, however, the idea of bi-directional parent-child influence has proven to be a delicate topic--one that risks unsettling parents, especially during times of stress. It would seem that Kurchinka's research-based approach to describing brain functioning might persuade parents to take a second look at their relational patterns in interacting with their children.

Explaining the association between the primitive, reactive brain and feelings (as contrasted with the neocortex or thinking brain), Kurchinka establishes emotions as the preeminent force in driving, and obscuring, good decision-making (and, in turn, behaviors). The author encourages parents to look inwardly in conceptualizing solutions to both ordinary and unusual family conflicts. In my view, the parental self-report questionnaire, which measures five traits (persistence, sensitivity, adaptability, intensity, and regularity) within the context of temperament (introversion v extroversion) amounts to an excellent and practical tool for facilitating self-understanding.

Kurchinka insists parents take the lead in downsizing internal and external expectations for perfection. The author is refreshingly straightforward in identifying regressed and aggressive behaviors as byproducts of stress in children. In normalizing children's

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<sup>1</sup> Kurchinka, Mary Sheedy (2000). *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles*. New York: HarperCollins.

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developmentally appropriate aspirations of grandeur, as well as their yearning for unconditional nurturing, Kurchinka prepares parents to think about how they might genuinely connect with their children.

Of particular importance in parenting adolescents is an appreciation for their unique, often uneven, decision-making process compounded by an emerging need for privacy. Here the chapter on sensitive versus analytic minded problem solving would seem to be a useful tool in determining how best to approach a recalcitrant or impulsive decision maker.

Lastly, though empathic connection is proffered as the ideal stance from which to set boundaries with children, the author notes that, in some instances, specific medical circumstances better account for power struggles. These include learning and physical disabilities, along with mental health disorders.