

Who owns what?

Normal, healthy families struggle with power and struggle in many different ways about many different things. One unifying approach to family power is to look for who owns what, or rather, who thinks they own what, or who wants to own what. An example will probably help.

Parents and teenagers clash over a variety of issues: curfews, freedoms and privileges, choice of friends, chores; but the clash is probably best understood from the perspective of the above "who owns what" paradigm. The teenager might think of themselves as powerful, autonomous and invulnerable and clearly the one who should have the power to make the decision over their use of time, choice of friends, freedoms and privileges. The parent might view their teenager as young, somewhat thoughtless, a poor planner, reckless in matters of personal safety. The parent's perspective of the ownership issue is almost always very different from the teenager's. The parent might feel an urgent sense of responsibility to exert power to inhibit the teenager's impulses or to contribute to the development of important personal attributes pertaining to maturity, judgment and safety.

The families who fight about chores (for example) and think they are only fighting about chores are at a real disadvantage compared with the families who fight about chores and know they are fighting about ownership. Once the venue has shifted from the symbol of ownership (in this case, chores) to the psychological issue of ownership, the parents and teenager can have a very different conversation that is more about power and less about chores.

It is unlikely that the teenager will be the one with the insight to reformulate this conversation and many parents have great difficulty with this as well. Parents have to be reminded that their greatest emotion pertaining to their children usually involves fear of loss. Are my children safe? Will they grow up with the skills to be successful at whatever they confront in their lives? Have I been a good parent? The conversation that includes reference to these sensitive issues is very different from the conversation about setting rules and limits and insisting on where they can and cannot go and when they need to be home. Teenagers can tell the difference between a parent who says: "I need to own this right now but soon it will be yours", and a parent who merely says: "Because I say so, that's why".

I do not believe it is a reach to say that the intimate attachment between teenagers and their parents hinges on how this issue of "who owns what" is approached and resolved.