

## Power Plays:

Power plays are inevitable in Intermediates. As young people mature, they seek more independence. But parents of preadolescents know that 10 - 14 year-olds definitely aren't ready for the kind of independence they are looking for. Added to that, preadolescents are at a stage in their lives when they feel powerless to the extreme. They have given up the "child power" they received from being part of a family unit ("My dad is bigger than your dad." "My mom is smarter than yours,") They have little money at their disposal, since regular jobs are not yet available to them. They have almost no say in what they consider the important areas of their lives (curfew, family/time commitment, household tasks, coming and going as they please). They are regularly dependent on others for their transportation.

As a result of this sense of powerlessness, preadolescents often use power plays to grab some control over their lives and the lives of others. Power plays include non-verbal tantrums; smarting off; manipulating siblings, parents, and friends; and others, sometimes dangerous behaviors. Often, parents don't realize that the friction between them and their preadolescent is really an attempt to exert power, which is an inevitable action of young adolescents.

In this, preadolescents are a lot like two-year-olds, and often show similar behaviors. Two-year-olds say, "Me do it myself!" Preadolescents say, "Leave me alone!" or "That's stupid!" Two-year-olds throw them-selves on the floor and scream. Preadolescents slam doors, sulk, and refuse to talk. Two-year-olds bite or pinch. Preadolescents use ridicule and sarcasm to bug their siblings. Two-year-olds "get into things." Preadolescents take risks, like riding their bikes places they are not allowed to go, or watching movies they're not supposed to see. Both age groups vociferously deny doing any of the above. All of these are ways to exercise power and try out a beginning independence and separation from adult control.

Two-year-olds say, " NO" Middle schoolers say, " SO" ???

We can deal with power plays without using a bulldozer approach. Even if we did resort to running over a child, the "flattened" child would say, with a

smirk, "That didn't hurt." (Acting as if nothing hurts is the supreme power play.)

The first tip is think ahead...One of our best tools as parents is being prepared. As your son or daughter gets to the intermediate school years, get ready for at least occasional conflicts. Think through what is truly important to you. Is the youngster's hairstyle as important as homework? Isn't curfew more of a concern than crabbiness? Obviously, dawdling is a lot easier to accept than drugs. As these give-and-take situations start, know ahead of time what areas you are willing to negotiate and what areas are absolutes.

Don't give in to manipulation..Our children have spent more than ten years figuring us out. By preadolescence they know just how to trick us into giving a certain response. They play mum against dad, parent against friends. Sometimes it's to protect them-selves or get something they want, but often it's just to exercise power, to "get" us. Being aware of this ability kids have is the first step: not giving in is the second. Check out details and ask yourself some questions before you react.

Another simple way of dealing with power plays is to disengage. Some kids want to carry on just to be carrying on, just to see how far they can go. This type of struggle often ends with both parties saying things that damage the relationship. Don't let this happen. If you see such a struggle coming (especially if it's a recurring argument) or if you are fast coming to the end of your ability to be reasonable, disengage. Step away. This may make your child angry and lead to spiteful words, but you can handle those words better than you child can handle your berating or belittling.

Another foil to constant battling is to bend a little. Kids this age do feel powerless, so it helps to give them appropriate power whenever possible. Get to know your child well enough to know what decisions he or she can make and let him or her make as many as possible. Negotiate more, listen more, command less.

Don't use power unless it's urgent. Parents have the ultimate power, and kids know it. We don't have to "prove" it to them at every turn. Save your strength for those really important issues you've decided are non-negotiable. Eventually kids are going to possess power of their own, and we want them to be able use it wisely.