

# EMPOWERING YOUR CHILDREN WITH THE V OF LOVE

**A**S PARENTS you've undoubtedly read many books assuring you that you can never love your children too much. Other books have urged you to empower your children. Although I concur with those who say you can never love your children too much, I would caution you to empower them carefully and only gradually with the "V of Love."

Visualize the letter V as a model for guiding the extent of praise, power, and freedom given to your children. When your children are very young, they begin at the bottom of the V with moderate praise, limited freedom and power, and a few choices. As they grow in maturity and are able to handle more responsibility, the limiting walls of the V spread out giving them gradually increasing freedom and power while still providing parental limits. During adolescence, as your children move to the top of the V, they become capable of considerably more independent decision-making and judgment. They can earn and accept higher praise more comfortably. They feel trusted and continue to respect guidance from their parents and teachers. They're thus more competent and have more confidence for moving out of the V into adult independence and personal decision-making.

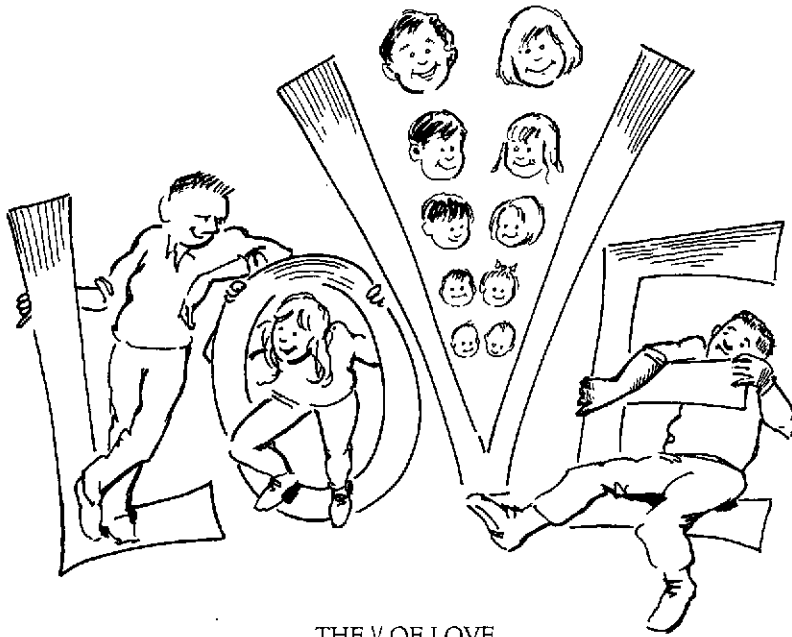
In some families the V is reversed to look like this:  $\wedge$ . Children who start at the base of this figure are given too much freedom, too

much praise, too many choices, and indefinite wide limits. They become accustomed to having power and making decisions before they have the wisdom to handle their freedom responsibly. However, as these children move toward adolescence, their parents may observe that they don't appear mature enough for so much power and freedom. They observe them making poor choices and worry about the dangers that arise among teenagers. Their teens may choose not to do homework or study and instead become involved with a negative peer group. Cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, promiscuous sex, and AIDS are serious threats from which their parents try to protect them. Thus, parents begin to make demands on their children, which they haven't done before. They set limits and take freedoms away. Adolescents who had too much control as children now feel overcontrolled by parents. They believe they know more than their parents and teachers. Their angry statements reflect their feelings of restriction. "My parents are controlling me. They want too much of me. They expect me to be perfect. All they care about is school. They used to treat me like an adult and now they treat me like a child," these adolescents complain. They rebel, feel increasingly angry, or are depressed. Not only do they fight their parents and teachers, they fight learning as well.

These worried parents overpunish and narrow limits further, resulting in even more anger and rebellion. The oppositional adolescents turn formerly happy homes into armed camps in which underachievement is only one part of the problem. Neither the parents nor the teens understand or communicate with each other. Relative to the power and control these teens once had, they feel powerless.

Once freedom is given, it isn't easily taken away. The resulting adversarial mode may force adolescents to rebel too stubbornly, parents to respond too negatively, and both to lose the positive home atmosphere that can be so valuable in educating children. Children brought up with the inverted V of Love expend their energies protecting the power they believe they should have and the extraordinary abilities for which they were overpraised. This pattern of protection only causes them to build defense mechanisms.

The V-shaped love encourages children to develop their talents, freedom, and power. Developmental empowerment is much smoother and more comfortable for adolescents and parents alike



THE V OF LOVE

and provides the appropriate atmosphere in which children can be inspired to learn.

## PRAISE

Children thrive in an environment of being valued and loved. Praise for children's accomplishments encourages them to continue to accomplish and share their achievements with those whom they please. Attention to their smiles, gurgles, "patty-cakes," and "bye-byes" enhances their communication and their learning. **Reading to children, discussing, sharing interests, and answering their questions expands their vocabulary, their knowledge, and their intelligence.** They soon find that their new vocabulary, knowledge, and reasoning skills empower them to capture adult conversation. They thus learn that intelligence and learning are valued in their home. This is an apparent good beginning to a lifetime of learning. Praise, attention, and positive reinforcement are good for children. **Praise is probably the most effective communicator of adult values and provides parents with a critical tool for guiding**

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**children.** The expressed pleasure of adults is the most powerful early motivator.

## TOO MUCH PRAISE, TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING

Some parents who recognize the value of praise make the assumption that if some praise is good, more praise must be better. Other parents assume that if they praise their children in extravagant terms, it will build their children's self-concepts even more. However, both are "too much of a good thing." In their attempts to build children's confidence, some parents can actually praise too much. Too much praise may cause your children to become praise-dependent or "attention addicted." Too extravagant praise may result in your children feeling extremely pressured because they believe they must live up to extraordinary and impossible standards that are conveyed by your praise. **In order to guide your children without pressuring them, praise with the values within which you'd like them to live,** and recognize that they should not be encumbered with impossible expectations. For example, you can praise your children as "good workers" or as "bright," "creative," "kind," or "attractive." It's better to avoid terms like "brilliant," "extraordinary," "perfect," "stunning," "spectacular," "genius," "best," "most beautiful," or "favorite." The former are qualities they can control by their own efforts; the latter may be internalized as impossible goals and are highly competitive messages. Unless your children turn out to be spectacular, brilliant, perfect, and beautiful, they may feel frustrated about their inadequacies forever. They may also blame you for putting pressure on them, although you'll wonder where that pressure came from. Incidentally, if in your enthusiasm and love for your children the extreme words slip out occasionally, there's no harm done. It's the habitual use that's likely to cause problems.

A mother shared with me her surprise at her son's frustration with her high expectations for him. She kept reassuring him by telling him that he was already perfect. She thought that doing so would help his self-esteem; however, it made him feel more and more pressured. Her words of praise were viewed by her son as her expectations; therefore, he assumed she expected him to be perfect.

Reasonable praise feels like reasonable expectations; extraordinary praise feels like extraordinary expectations.

In most two-parent families, fathers are more involved with their children than they were in former generations. Thus, their praise words will be viewed as Daddy's expectations. If Dad's most frequent praise words relate to a daughter's beauty or a son's athletic skill, girls will believe Dad values appearance above all for them, and boys will assume sports are the first priority in Dad's expectations. I only emphasize this point because my observations of fathers and their children often encourage the "princess" and "jock" images. If children are expected to be intelligent thinkers and learners, overemphasis on appearance and sports will deter their excitement about learning.

Don't praise your children for every accomplishment, word, drawing, or clever insight. Permit them to enjoy the inner rewards of learning and creating. **Be sure to insist that they work and play alone for a little time each day so they can feel the fun of learning and they don't become dependent on praise.** Children

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THE ROOTS OF PERFECTIONISM

who become attention addicted at home are likely to feel, by comparison, attention deprived at school. They may also feel neglected when siblings, with whom they must share the limelight, enter the family. Their sense of specialness, which was dependent on continuous praise, may disappear when they find they must share attention.

Children who have been attention addicted may shut down to school learning when they feel attention deprived in the classroom. They may appear to have the symptoms of either inattentive or hyperactive types of attention disorders. They typically don't understand their own feelings, although occasionally children with whom I've worked have called out in class to teachers in despair, "I'm special, don't you know?" or "I'm very, very smart." Several children have shared with me their concerns. In the words of one little girl, "The teacher just doesn't give me enough attention."

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**Moderate praise empowers children enough to feel confident and to love learning;** however, too much praise enslaves them to pressure and dependence. Children who have been told they are the best believe they are expected to be the best. Children who have been admired as perfect believe that they must be perfect. "Perfect" and "the best" don't exist in the real world. Don't imprison your children with impossible goals in the hope of building their self-confidence.

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When two parents are working, and their children are being cared for by child-care providers, there are some special issues to discuss with them related to praise. Because praise conveys adult values to your children, it will be important to communicate your values to those important adults with whom your children spend many hours. If a nanny comes to your home daily or you're taking a preschooler to a caregiver who only cares for a few children, their praise or lack thereof will influence your children. **It's best to give the caregiver in writing some words you like to use and some you'd rather not use to encourage your children.** Of course, if your preschool children are in a day-care center, you'll have little say about what words the day-care provider uses, but you do have a choice of providers. If you observe in a day-care center for a few hours, you can easily notice the atmosphere. **A negative environment in which children are being frequently criticized**

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**is certainly not a good place for your children.** A negative environment only encourages your children's negative behaviors. You should also be sensitive to overpraise or comparative praise. Actually overpraise is less likely to occur in such a center because attention is shared by multiple children right from the start. Comparative praise can be quite common and can be damaging if your child is always either negatively or most positively compared to others.

## THE REFERENTIAL SPEAKING EFFECT

Discussion among adults about children may have an even more powerful effect on children's behavior than direct praise or negative statements. I've coined the term *referential speaking* to describe this conversation that takes place frequently between parents, among parents and other relatives, between parents and teachers, and, yes, even among teachers, within children's hearing. The description of children's activities, behaviors, and misbehaviors, as if the children are not listening, may empower them or cause serious problems and feelings of limitations for them. As with praise, referential speaking can encourage children to have a realistic self-concept, may cause them to feel pressured, or may result in discouragement.

Lest you think that only unintelligent people speak "referentially," let me assure you that *all* parents, relatives, and teachers sometimes speak referentially, and it's not a function of lack of intelligence. Referential speaking is talk by persons who feel most comfortable with spontaneity and are in a hurry. They may be busy and not have the time or opportunity to speak confidentially and thus describe their children to other adults without thinking about the impact on those children.

**Referential speaking is not all negative. Referential speaking about children can set intentional expectations that are positive and can provide a sense of positive control for them.** For example, if you say to your spouse, "I notice that Elizabeth's really persevering in her efforts; she's showing initiative and doing more than what's expected," Elizabeth will be encouraged in her perseverance and effort if she is hearing your conversation (even from

another room). She can control these abilities, which represent positive qualities.

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What kinds of referential speaking are harmful? **Referential speaking that makes children feel inadequate or incapable is always harmful.** Referential speaking that empowers children to manipulate adults is also harmful. Here are some examples of harmful referential speaking:

### Case 1

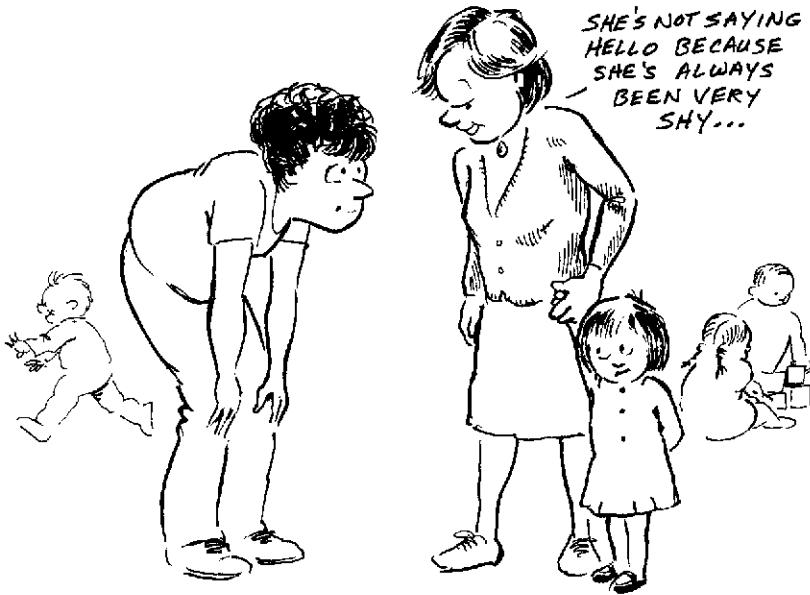
Amy comes to kindergarten screening with her mother. Her mother introduces Amy to the teacher, who welcomes Amy to the classroom. Amy doesn't say anything. Her mother feels embarrassed. She explains in Amy's presence, "I'm sorry that Amy isn't saying hello, Mrs. Smith, but she is very shy. She's always been very shy."

Amy has probably heard five thousand (or more) times before she ever entered school how shy she is. Mother feels the need to explain Amy's behavior because of her own discomfort with Amy's poor manners. She explains to a teacher, to another parent, to a friend, or to a relative why Amy doesn't say hello. What Amy has learned is that she's shy. She thinks that her shyness makes it impossible for her to say hello. Amy assumes that she is biologically, internally, and forever shy. Why would Amy expect to say hello?

How could we change this mother's referential speaking? She could say to Dad or vice versa, "Did you notice how nicely Amy's manners are improving?" When Amy is introduced to the teacher, Mother could ignore Amy's not saying hello and, instead, permit Amy to get right to work. Soon, Amy would learn that she can say "Hello" just like other children.

When parents come to see me about their shy children, I ask them to erase the word *shy* from their vocabulary. The parents find that within a few days or a few weeks their children learn reasonable manners upon greeting other people. We can't necessarily change children's total personalities, nor do we want to, but we can easily teach them reasonable normal social behaviors. Even quiet, sensitive children can learn appropriate manners, and they will learn them if they are not continually labeled "shy" by the important adults in the children's environment. One of the fami-





## REFERENTIAL SPEAKING

lies I worked with returned several years later to ask how to handle their previously shy daughter who had since become too aggressive.

## Case 2

Bruce's parents are at a conference with his fourth-grade teacher. The teacher comments, "Bruce seems to be disorganized." Bruce's mother and father agree. They add, "He's disorganized at home. His desk is a mess. His room is a mess. You know, he is our ADHD (attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder) child."

Bruce listens from the back of his classroom. As he hears the familiar tirade about his disorganization and his impulsive behaviors, he feels disorganized and impulsive. He assumes that ADHD means he can't do anything about his problem.

Even if this boy actually has an attention deficit disorder, he can improve his behaviors. Referring to him in this way causes him to feel powerless to control his behaviors. Most parents don't wish schools to label their children negatively, yet they unintentionally label their own children.

### Case 3

What about Brian? He's impossible! Yes, Brian is impossible. He hears it every time his dad is out of town. His mother tells his dad on the telephone how impossible Brian has been. When his dad's at home and walks in the door from work, the first message from his mom is that Brian's been impossible again. What Brian knows is that he's not only impossible, but his mom is powerless to discipline him or guide him. It would be wonderful if that encouraged Brian to be sympathetic to his mother, but as you know, he'll continue to step all over his mother.

How could that be changed? Skip the impossibility of his behavior. Concentrate on the techniques that channel and limit that behavior and referentially speak to Dad or Grandma about his positive and improved behaviors: "Dad, Brian's been a terrific help while you were traveling!" "Grandma, Brian seems to be maturing. He seems to be outgrowing his immature misbehaviors."

Referential speaking has a great deal of impact on children. It truly sets expectations. If you use it positively, provided it is not too extreme, it has positive impact. If you use it negatively, it may have a terrible impact on your children, their attitude about learning, and their self-confidence. **When you see the positive, tell someone. When you see the negative, limit it or ignore it, but don't talk about it if your children are anywhere within a thousand feet.** They have extraordinary homing-in senses when they hear their names. Don't you remember how you tuned in when you heard your parents talk about you? The more you say, the more you'll see.

Here's another example from my personal experience: While I was writing about referential speaking for a previous book, I thought I'd better experiment with Sara, our youngest child. I was always in school or working when she was growing up, so I tried most everything out on Sara. In this case, Sara didn't know about the experiment (although she does now), nor did my husband. He was sitting across from me at the kitchen table in conversation after our day at work. Sara was upstairs in her bedroom doing her homework. I knew that Sara could hear everything upstairs that we talked about in the kitchen. So as part of the conversation with my husband, I simply injected a little bit of preplanned referential

speaking. I said, "Sara's been working so hard lately. She's getting so much homework done." We continued our conversation. It wasn't ten minutes before Sara came downstairs, saying in haste, "I just came down for a quick drink of water. I'm going right back up to do my homework. I'm really getting a lot done." The experiment worked, and I knew that our positive referential speaking inspired Sara's continued hard work that evening.

Try referential speaking about your children (not your spouse). You can make a difference in a day by speaking referentially to another adult about your children. **Just give a positive message about their efforts or behaviors. Make sure that you're honest and realistic.** You'll discover how powerful adult communication can be for inspiring positive expectations in your children. However, please be conscious of your referential speaking, either positive or negative, because as our grandparents used to say, "Little pitchers have big ears." Your children are listening. Even when you close the doors, they can hear through walls. When you think they are asleep, they seem to absorb your words. Taking walks not only affords exercise but also privacy for those difficult discussions about your children that you don't wish them to hear.

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## EMPOWER YOUR CHILD WITH THE POWER TO BE A CHILD

When children are small, they require small amounts of power. As they get older and grow in maturity and responsibility, they should have expanded power. **Don't treat children as little adults. Give them child, not adult, choices.** Don't consult them in everything or assume that they can share your adult experiences and feelings. Let them look forward to adult privileges and power, and permit them to gradually earn adult status.

Certain kinds of children are most likely to be "adultized" by their parents: gifted children; only or oldest children; and children of single or divorced parents. Adultizing confers some benefits but also causes some serious risks for children's healthy development.

Children's verbal giftedness increases the likelihood of adultization because very bright children often display advanced vocabulary, reasoning skills, and sensitivities that cause parents to assume

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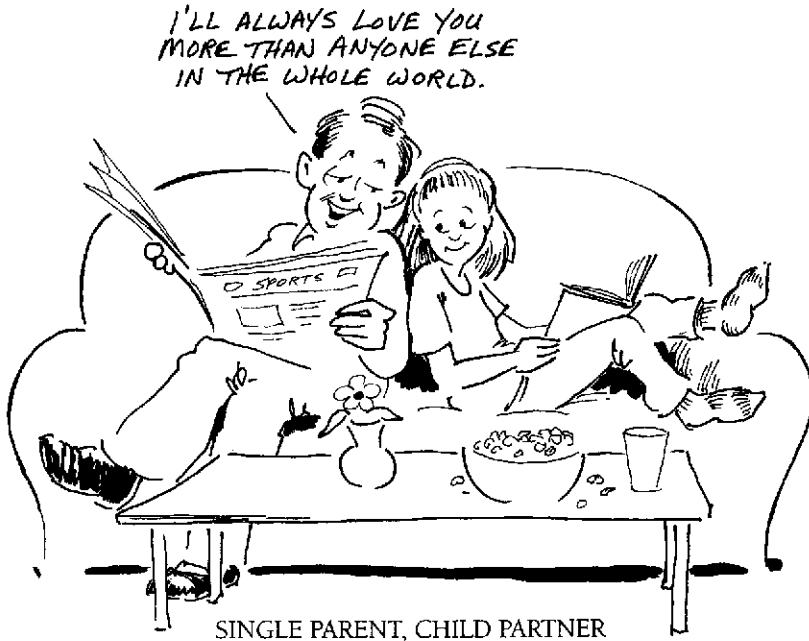
that those children are more mature. They may actually be more mature than their age-mates, but aren't likely to be as mature as they sound. They require the opportunity to play out a reasonable childhood. They are children first, gifted children second.

Only children and oldest children are frequently treated like one of the adults in the family. It's reasonably easy for parents to accommodate one child, and they frequently do so, sometimes at the expense of the other parent. Thus, these children become accustomed to equal adult status, and sometimes, more than equal power. They may sound exactly like little adults as they boss other children or insist on being treated as an equal to their parents.

Single parents and those undergoing divorce frequently choose one child, usually their oldest, as confidant and partner. They may actually view this child as the main purpose of their lives and direct all their efforts toward the emotional sustenance of that child. They may consult with the child about major life issues and even share their bed. They often assure the child that they will always love her more than anyone else in the entire world. They replace the closeness and intimacy that they would normally have with a spouse with their relationship with this favored child. The adultizing of the child may result from the parent's feelings of rejection and vulnerability. Sometimes these parents feel that they must compensate for the child's perceived insecurity because she has only one parent.

Adultized children gain the social, intellectual, and apparent emotional sophistication that emerges from a close and enriched experience with their parent. They may have more mature insights into behaviors than their peers. They may, however, suffer from the feelings of insecurity and powerlessness that emerge with too much adult power. They may feel insecure because they simply don't know how to limit themselves. In classroom and peer relationships, where they aren't given adult status, they may feel "put down" or disrespected in comparison to the way in which they're regarded at home. They actually feel "disempowered" relative to the feelings of being overempowered at home.<sup>1</sup>

The most difficult risk of adultization is "dethronement." When another sibling is born or the parent remarries, the child may feel irrationally and extraordinarily jealous, although he knows he should be happy about the new member of the family.<sup>2</sup> Dethroned children typically exhibit negativity, anger, or sadness. Their personalities



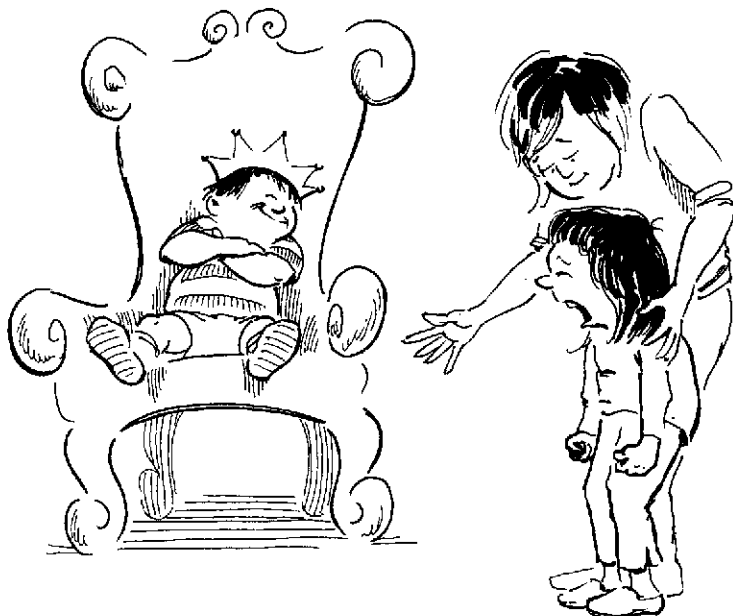
may change so dramatically that parents, teachers, and even doctors may assume they're undergoing clinical depression. Some comments from parents about dethroned children follow:

"He was a delightful child until I brought our second son home from the hospital; he was like a wild animal thereafter. I couldn't seem to control him at all."

"She was a marvelous little girl until her brother started reading as well as she did. She became obnoxious, unpleasant, negative, and attention seeking. She only seemed comfortable when only the two of us were together."

If you adultize children too early, you will find that they want to run your family, their teachers, and other students. As in politics, too much power corrupts. Such children may become continual arguers who argue about everything. They believe that if they provide sufficient reason, they are *always* right. They say, "Why would I argue unless I was right?"

Those arguing children can no longer see merit in any opinion but their own. As they trap you into the battles you promised your-



DETHRONING AN EMPEROR

self you would handle rationally, you find yourself losing your temper again. "How did this happen?" you ask yourself. Sometimes you feel as if you'd like to kick them. "How can that ten-year-old believe he can run the entire family? Does this child have no humility at all?"

Teachers and parents, offended by such powerful children, try to "put them in their places." Adults respond to these dictatorial, offensive children with a big NO permanently engraved on their foreheads. The children make requests. Adults say no. Adults stop listening. "No, no, no. Go away," they say. "Unfair," the children argue, undaunted. They believe that no one understands them, and almost no one does.

### **DIRECTIONS OF POWER: DEPENDENCE AND DOMINANCE**

Children may exhibit too much power in either dependent or dominant directions or both. Dominant power is easily identified in aggressive children who want to monopolize attention or in those