Book Review


Children and adolescents who are aggressive and self-destructive exhibit a long list of behaviors that severely challenge parents, educators and mental health professionals. Provocations, angry outbursts, risky and self-destructive threats and acts, violence against others, self and property, school drop-out, truancy, sexual promiscuity, drug abuse, lies, thefts, and blackmail are some of the behaviors that baffle and shake even the most well-intentioned, loving and patient parents. Parents often find that their attempts to change their child’s behavior, even interventions that are recommended by professionals, misfire and seem to actually make matters worse. In their confusion, parents may waver between giving in and fighting back, both of which lead to further escalations at home. In this brilliant new book, Haim Omer demonstrates how the principles of nonviolent resistance as exemplified by the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., effectively counter and eliminate violence in children when implemented in the family.

This novel, evidence-based treatment has been effective in hundreds of families and is clearly, thoughtfully and thoroughly described in this book which includes a 26-page, step-by-step, instruction manual for parents.

In the forward, Omer instructs the reader in the basic political-social doctrine of nonviolence resistance. This doctrine, he notes, “evolved into a practical, detailed, and consistent theory following the work of Mahatma Gandhi. In his struggles against the discrimination against the colored in South Africa, against religious and class violence in India, and against the British occupation, Gandhi demonstrated the power of nonviolent resistance and its amazing ability to mobilize supporters, to impassion activists, to empower the weak, and to curb violence and oppression (p. ix).” The combination of the high moral standard on which this doctrine rests and its success in curbing escalation are the exact antidote that parents and concerned friends and professionals require to nonviolently combat the vicissitudes of out-of-control behaviors in children and adolescents.

Chapter 1 deftly lays out the rationale for nonviolent resistance as a means to counter aggression in children and adolescents, and case examples are used
to exemplify the effectiveness of this approach. Parents are shown how they can resolve to change themselves, take meaningful steps toward reasserting their love and presence, and in turn change their families without their children participating in any adjunctive psychotherapy. By reasserting their parental presence through the use of basic steps including seeking support from family and friends and refusing to retaliate with violence, parents can establish an atmosphere of respect and reconciliation within the family that leads to dramatic changes in the behaviors of themselves and their children.

Chapters 2 through 4 look carefully at the dynamic that develops between aggressive children and their caregivers and the cycles of escalation that characterize children’s efforts to control their parents through the use of violence and self-harm along with threats of violence and threats of self-harm. In clear language that is accessible to professionals and parents alike, these chapters demonstrate how nonviolent resistance works. Nonviolent resistance is characterized by the following principles: (1) A firm stance on issues of violence, risk-taking and antisocial behavior and (2) Absolute avoidance of all physical or verbal attacks. As co-authors Uri Weinblatt and Carmelit Avraham-Krehwinkel note in Chapter 3, entitled The Parents’ Instruction Manual, “The purpose of nonviolent resistance is to restore your presence as a parent in the child’s life. We believe that a clear and firm parental presence is the chief means for developing a good relationship with your children. The parental authority we aim for is based not on the parents being physically stronger than the child but on their being determinedly present in her life. The more you establish your presence, the greater the chances your child will give up her destructive patterns and a dialogue will once again be established between you and your child (p. 48).” Parents are encouraged to recover their voice as parents and as persons and are instructed not only in concrete techniques for carrying out these interventions (i.e. sit-ins in the child’s room, telephone rounds calling the child’s associates, breaking the seal of secrecy, tailing the child, withholding services, protracted sit-down strikes sometimes lasting days, and reconciliation gestures, to name a few) but also in the important underlying concepts. Parents are explicitly instructed that it is not the techniques alone that effect the change but rather the effect of, “the process, which is cumulative and lies in the inner connections between the methods, the messages, and the attitudes it engenders (p. 71).”

Chapters 5 through 8 then tackle immensely important and complicated topics that are rarely addressed in psychological literature including: violence toward siblings, children who take control of the house, parent and teacher alliances, and applying the principles of nonviolent resistance in communities. These four topics are each addressed with the utmost clarity and deep insight followed by concrete solutions to what are often considered to be insurmountable mental health problems in families, schools, and communities.

Readers familiar with the tragic difficulties confronted by many families will find themselves filled with hope and enthusiasm by reading this book. Professionals