

Names are changed to honor client confidentiality

Love Is More Powerful Than Force

She wasn't about to budge.

Kim's 15-year-old daughter, Nicole, made it known that a weekend camping trip wasn't her idea of fun. Everyone in the family—except her—was pumped about going. Nicole's resistance didn't sit well with Kim. In fact, before their scheduled appointment with me, several flare-ups had already occurred. Sitting face to face in my office, they were primed to discuss the matter.

Before getting started, I laid the groundwork by making these points:

We increase our ability to influence others when we keep the communication channels open—when everyone has a chance to express their opinions equally. Other essential ingredients include respect and a sincere desire to learn the thoughts of the other person.

Kim kicked it off with an inquiry: “Okay, why are you putting up such a fight over this?”

As Nicole started to explain, Kim cut her off with protests and arguments. Within a matter of seconds, the “discussion” deteriorated into a one-person lecture. Kim was doing all the talking while a detached Nicole coolly gazed out a window. Clearly, Kim's goal was to overpower and persuade—not to listen. Missing was a genuine curiosity to learn her daughter's point of view.

As it became apparent that her attempts weren't producing the desired results, Kim's level of frustration climbed up a notch. “Okay,” she said curtly, “if you're not going to join us, then you'll be staying at your grandmother's!”

Nicole shot a momentary glare at her mom.

Kim knew such an option would feel like a death sentence to her daughter, because at her grandmother's—out in the country—Nicole would be far away from her friends. Nicole was counting on staying with her aunt, who lives in the city.

What did Kim accomplish? Not a thing. By dominating the conversation and resorting to threats, she lost her ability to reach her daughter. At this point, both mother and daughter were immersed in an ugly mix of bad feelings—with nothing resolved. To break this deadlock, each would need to go beneath the surface and see the other's true feelings—the pain. Such is the pathway to compassion—the only avenue for resolving differences.

“Kim,” I asked warmly, “why is it so important to you that Nicole go camping? Get deeply honest with her, letting her know what really underlies your strong wish that she go.”

A noticeable shift occurred in Kim’s demeanor. Holding back the tears she said, “It just wouldn’t be the same without her. I would miss her!”

All got quiet for a moment as Kim’s tears flowed freely. As she continued to elaborate—conveying the truth in her heart—it became easy to conclude that her tears stemmed from grief, the feelings that accompany a sense of loss.

Kim’s not alone; she was experiencing a loss common to many. It’s the grief associated with watching our children grow up. Their budding independence—although welcomed and cherished—has a bittersweet aftertaste.

So, at the root of Kim’s anger is pain. Tucked away in her memory is a gleeful little girl excited about doing things as a family. Kim feels it all slipping away as she watches Nicole distance herself. Driven, almost desperately, to preserve the joy and closeness of former times, Kim tries to control impending change.

“What you’ve just said is exactly what your daughter has needed to hear from you.” I said. “She needs the honesty of your soul-felt emotions. Hostility and threats merely cause her to shut down.”

As for her daughter, from the moment Kim softened, Nicole’s gaze shifted away from the window. Her expression had melted into tenderness, as she looked directly into her mom’s eyes.

The next step was for Kim to truly hear her daughter, without interrupting, judging, or reacting defensively. To pull that off, Kim would need to change her agenda, making the well-being of their bond the first priority.

Until their intimate exchange, it was impossible for Nicole to have a heartfelt response toward her mother’s wish. She felt forced more than loved, and anything less doesn’t motivate us. Indisputably, love is more powerful than force.

Having the final word as a parent, Kim may not offer an option for Nicole. But because of her compassionate understanding of her daughter’s underlying reluctance, Kim’s authority will have a softer edge. And camping will seem a tad more appealing. In the end, Kim may not be successful at influencing her daughter’s desires. But she can successfully influence her heart, thus nurturing the joy and closeness between them for which she truly yearns.