Legitimate vs. Abusive Uses of Authority

From the time we’re little children, we’re told to respect authority. Some people think that means we shouldn’t question authority. However, if we don’t question what authority means and how it should be used, how do we know when someone is abusing their power? Even legitimate authority can be twisted and distorted by abusive people to justify violence and other abuse.

And many of us are authority figures ourselves. We may be parents, teachers or supervisors. Or we may be considered experts on a particular subject. If we don’t question what authority means, as well as how it should be used, what kind of parent, teacher or supervisor will we be? While authority is neither good nor bad in and of itself, how we use it matters.

What does authority mean?

There are legitimate ways to become authority figures:

• We have become an expert on a particular subject, so people listen to our views on that subject and can learn from us. Example: Teachers.

• We are entrusted with the care of others who have less power than we do, or who are unable to survive on their own. Example: Parents.

• We have been chosen by others to represent their interests. Example: Elected officials.

• We have a job that requires us to preserve order and protect public safety. Example: Police officers or military personnel.

• We have been hired to oversee and coordinate the work of others. Example: Workplace supervisors.

• We have received specialized training that allows us to help other people. Example: Doctors, advocates or counselors.

Legitimate uses of authority

People use power and authority in a legitimate way when they:

• Operate in accordance with accepted ethical standards for the position they hold.

• Are willing to accept responsibility and accountability for their behavior and decisions.
• Respect the inherent worth and dignity of others, including those in a relationship with us who have less power.

• Communicate expectations in a way that is clear, consistent and easily understood.

• Understand that trust and loyalty must be earned, even by people in positions of authority.

• Seek input from people who will be affected by decisions.

**Illegitimate uses of authority**

Authority is a privilege, not a right. People abuse their power and authority when they:

• Treat other people as if they have less value as human beings.

• Disregard the rights of others, including people with whom they have authority.

• Treat others in ways that show disrespect – for example, yelling or using profanity or name-calling.

• Overstep the boundaries of their authority – for example, a workplace supervisor who tries to pry into your personal affairs.

• Use humiliation, violence or intimidation to establish control.

• Take advantage of power imbalances to exploit others – for example, engaging in sexual harassment.

**Our rights with authority figures**

When dealing with someone who is in a position of authority, we have the right to:

• Be treated with dignity and respect, no matter who we are and no matter who the other person is.

• Ask questions about anything we don’t understand.

• Get respect for our personal boundaries.

• Go up the chain of command or use grievance procedures to report abuses of authority.