

## **The Dreaded Power Struggles!**

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I do not know of any parent who does not dread power struggles. This is one of the most popular things that brings families into therapy. There is nothing like a battle with your own child to cause intense frustration and self-doubt. Not to mention that our kids seem particularly adept at picking times when we are late for work or when your mother-in-law is there to see the whole thing.

The only power struggles you truly win are those that you avoid. Once a child has engaged you in a negotiating, arguing, or tantruming battle, everybody loses. From the toddler who throws himself down and screams to the teen who becomes a prosecuting attorney, your best bet is to avoid ever being drawn into battling like an equal. It is very strange to think about it, but power struggles keep undesirable behavior going. It's not that they are pleasant for children, but during a 'battle' with you, your child is actually getting something he wants. When he can engage you, the child gets your full attention, 'blows off steam', and sometimes gets you to give in. Even if you are only losing the occasional power struggle, that rare reinforcement of the unwanted behavior is enough to make it worse over time. Once your child learns that every now and then you will give in, it is just like he's playing the slots in Vegas. He will keep going with more and more determination until the next big 'pay off' comes. Then the pattern becomes very difficult to break.

So the real answer is to keep power struggles from happening as much as humanly possible. First off, you can be proactive. Watch out for situations that make a power struggle more likely. The big triggers include: video games, low blood sugar, fatigue, an anxiety provoking situation, having to share, going to/staying in bed, not enough opportunity to burn off energy, and transitioning from a preferred activity (watching TV) to an unwelcome activity (going to school). We parents can anticipate most of these things coming and plan our strategy in advance by setting up expectations. Give lots of warnings and let the child know explicitly what to expect ("In 2 minutes, it will be time to turn off the TV and put on your coat"). If you are going to a trouble zone like a grocery store candy aisle, tell the child in advance what you will and will not be buying. Set a timer to tell your child when it is time to stop playing computer games. If you are going out, let the child know what behavior you expect to see, and what behaviors will lead to having to leave. Once you set an expectation, make sure to stick to it!

The other two big ways to avoid the power struggle is giving choices and just plain empathizing. I am borrowing here from a terrific book called *How to Talk so Kids will Listen and Listen so Kids will Talk*, which I can not recommend enough. Your kids will be less likely to battle with you if you give them two things everyone wants, including choices and the feeling that you understand their perspective. While the 'forced choice' does not work every time, it can stave off many battles. Give kids lots of little choices whenever you have wiggle room. Choices are great for their sense of independence and for helping them learn to take responsibility for their own decisions. You can offer choices related to when the child will do something (now or in 5 minutes), how it will be done, and what the child would like (which cereal, which shirt, which homework assignment first etc.)

If you can not give your child a choice, such as when its time to leave for school, let him know that you understand how he feels about it. We all feel so much better about unpleasant things when we feel that the important people in our lives care what we are thinking. This is NOT the same thing as giving in to our child's demands! Empathizing is about helping your child tolerate the frustrations we all face in our day to day lives, not trying to make the frustration go away. We all have to do things like get shots and wait our turn, and kids need to learn to cope. However, we can help kids feel better with such simple statements like: "You wish you could play that game all day instead of going to Grandma's", "You're really disappointed about not being able to have more cake" or "Having to leave your teddy bear feels sad, you

miss him when you're at school." By empathizing with our children and giving voice to their feelings, we can help them feel that we are on their side, and that we care about their experiences. For an older child or teen, tell them to write you a letter/email describing their grievances. A little empathy goes a long way towards making them feel willing to go along with our directions.

Finally, the important thing in managing power struggles is to diffuse them if you can not prevent them. Keep in mind, it is always better to be proactive in managing behavior than reactive. When you have to be reactive, start by labeling the feeling ("You look frustrated" "I can see you are getting annoyed about this" or "This makes you very grumpy."), and then state your expectation firmly ("And now we are going to have to leave for school" or "But I expect you touch the dog gently" or "Use words, not fists!"). If the child starts to calm down, you can offer a forced choice at this point ("Now, do you want to wear your coat or your jacket to school?"). If the child escalates with negotiating or a tantrum, it is time to get very firm and direct about what you are going to do ("If you do not choose, I will choose" or "We can discuss it later, right now it is time for school", "If you need to calm down, I expect you to sit on the steps for two minutes."). You're your statements short. Then once you have told the child what you expect, it is time to ignore him until he complies. Some children will become very provocative trying to re-engage you, but ignore all behavior except something that puts your child or someone else in danger. Once the child complies or gets close enough towards acceptable behavior, praise and give attention again.

Across the board, your goal is to give lots of attention, descriptive praise, and affection for desirable behavior, and as little as possible for unwanted behavior. In most families, we tend to pay little attention to the kids when they are doing what we want, and give them our undivided attention when they are being inappropriate. A power struggle is our children's way of trying to get control over us, so keep in mind that once we are engaged in battling like equals, they have already won. Lastly, it is important to remember that our children do NOT really want to win power struggles. A child who wins power struggles is not a happy child, instead he becomes anxious, angry, and contemptuous (Remember Veruca Salt from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?). What truly makes a child feel happy and calm is when he knows that his parents are in-control, protecting him even from his own worst impulses.

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<http://www.iser.com/resources/power-struggles.html>

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