

WIN, LOSE OR DRAW!

POWER STRUGGLES DO NOT HAVE TO BE A LOSING BATTLE.

Power struggles are often thought of in relation to power and control: who has it, who wants it, who wins and who loses. The reality is adults have much power and control; children generally have very little. Yet, when caught in a power struggle it is normal to feel powerless and manipulated. But children generally do not have a great desire to upset adults; they most often seek adult's love and acceptance. It may help to know that power struggles usually result from the child's own feelings and needs and not a desire to deliberately push your buttons.

Power struggles are like fires, they need certain ingredients to start and grow. Adults and children are more likely to enter into power struggles when these elements are present. Awareness and understanding of the child's perspective and needs can lead to approaches that enhance the adult/child relationship and diminish power struggles. The following are the "fuel" behind many battles.

Medical: Teething, Attention Deficit Disorder, anxiety, language concerns, or even allergies can impact power struggles. To identify if it is medical issue, consider the intensity, duration, and frequency of the behavior. If concerns persist, check with your child's pediatrician. These struggles often fade if and when the medical condition dissipates.

Sleep: On a scale of 1-10, how well rested are you today? How can you tell? When we are tired, our fuse is shorter and the ability to problem solve and cooperate is reduced. It is also more difficult to control our emotions, rein in negative reactions, and work well with others. Children are no different. Children's misbehavior is often related to sleep deprivation. Consider how tired your child is when determining how to address a power struggle.

Stress: If power struggles are increasing, consider the current situation. Have there been changes, stressful events, extra transitions, a move,

or a new sibling in the child's life? Remember, stress can be subtle or apparent. Many children find a birthday party or change in routine stressful. A parent's stress level also impacts a child's stress. This explains why, on the day that you are stressed and rushed, your child will be more likely to act out or fall apart. Stress is likely a contributing factor if the child could do something and now cannot or would do something and now won't. An independent two-year-old becomes very clingy, a three-year-old who has learned to use the toilet

now has an "accident," or an eight-year-old can't put on his socks. This is due to the impact stress has on the brain. Recognizing stress can help adults understand the real issue and respond in sensitive and caring ways. This will alleviate many struggles. **Normal developmental stage:** Take into account the type of behavior and the child's age. Power struggles can begin when children enter a new developmental stage or slip back due to stress. It is completely natural for a one-year-old to test the environment over and over and have



trouble waiting or sitting. The child is not seeking power or control, just internally driven to figure out how the world works. A two-year-old cannot control internal impulses or emotions so may run in the street, get up to explore at night, or show physical aggression toward others. A four-year-old needs control of body movement and pace so will tend to slow down when rushed. Becoming aware of normal development and maintaining age-appropriate expectations will help avoid many power struggles.

Temperament: An adult's and child's natural response to the world can also impact power struggles. To be successful, some people need a regular schedule, time to warm up to new ideas, preparation before transitions, a lot of activity, time to finish one task before moving on, and concrete ways to soothe and calm big emotions. Recognizing the advantages and sending positive messages about these traits will result in fewer struggles, less frustration, and increased connection between the adult and child.

Environment: Environment also makes a difference. In the winter, for example, children often do not get enough exercise and time outside. This can lead to an increase in sibling fights, inability to sit still, or running and jumping on furniture. Offering movement opportunities could stop potential struggles before they start.

Attending to the needs and feelings behind a struggle can significantly reduce struggles. But, it is unrealistic to avoid all struggles with young children. Try to recognize the inevitable clash early and then decide how you will work through it. Adults can choose to hold out and stick to a limit no matter what, use choices or negotiation, or drop out and let go. Each of these choices is valid and powerful. Remember to process the conflict later, when both the adult and child are calm. Take time to talk with the child and restate the limit and/or unacceptable behavior. Then explore what the child can do next time.

When thinking about power struggles, remember the words of Stephen Covey, "What you focus on will grow." Increasing the amount of encouraging words and affirming interactions you have with a child will grow the child's skills. Your expectations affect how a child behaves. Send positive messages about what you expect and how you feel about a child. Anticipate success and appreciate the gifts that child brings to this world. Your true power lies in the emotional bond you have with a child. Grow it!

RAELENE OSTBERG is the business liaison for the First Steps program, an initiative of the Rochester Area Foundation. Raelene is a parent educator and working mother invested in bringing helpful information to working parents.

Most power struggles can be avoided with a little planning and setting the stage for success. Pick one area that may be a challenge for you. Problem solve how you might apply it in your world and watch for positive results!

Tips for Avoiding Power Struggles:

Watch for cues. Be aware of the signs that you or your child are starting to get tired or stressed. If a child walks into the third store in a row whining, "Daddy, I am too tired," it is a good idea to take a break or head home early. Watch for common signs that the limits are being pushed and navigate as needed.

Build in routines, especially during transitions. Plan a routine that incorporates something fun and rewarding for the child. Imagine mornings that start with a five minute hug time, a race to see who can get dressed first, followed by a quick but relaxed breakfast together. This routine may be difficult to get started and you may need to plan ahead. However, once routines are in place, battle time may just turn into quality time.

Give child control when possible. Think about how much time in an hour, day, week, or month a young child gets to say what she will do, when she can start or stop playing, where she will go, how fast she will go there, or even what she will eat. Consider what the child gets to control and what is under the control of the adult. Look for opportunities to let the child have a say.

Offer choices. If your rule is no junk food before dinner, stick to the rule. But, when challenged, you can deflate tension by offering a choice. Let the child choose something healthy when hungry. "No, you cannot have a cookie, but how about frozen peas or apples dipped in yogurt?" This gives the child a chance to focus on options rather than what they do not get.

Have a few consistent limits. Too many limits may result in more struggles. Also, if limits change over time, children cannot relax, know what to expect, and see the pathway to success. Children are continually driven to look for the actual limit. So, choose a few limits that you can stick to even after a long exhausting day. This will teach your child when you say it, you mean it.

Use helpful communication techniques. Sometimes a struggle can erupt from the way something is said. Asking a question or adding "okay" at the end of a sentence implies the child has a choice. Instead, simply and clearly tell the child what is going to happen or what to do. "Give her the toy?" "Put the shirt over your head?" "Walk your feet out the door." Clear statements frame what to do and let the child know what is expected. At times, you may need to repeat the statement several times like a broken record.

Keep calm and relaxed. A child cannot easily calm down when being yelled at, threatened, or coerced. The best way to help a child calm down is to stay calm, take deep breaths and keep your voice steady. Repeat a comforting statement such as "When you are ready, I have a hug for you" or "Whew, you are really upset, this really means a great deal to you."

Make things fun. Make it sound enjoyable. It's time to clean up. Instead of "You're going to have to clean up your toys now." You might set a timer and say, "Let's see how many toys we can all pick up in five minutes." Using humor and fun can also reduce stress levels and build your relationship and bond with the young child in your life.

Helpful Power Struggle Resources

Kids, Parents and Power Struggles | Mary Sheedy Kurcinka
Unplugging Power Struggle | Jan Faul

Emotional Intelligence | Daniel Goleman
The Heart of Parenting | John Gottman



Rochester Women magazine is a founding member of the First Steps Business Alliance and is the sponsor of these two pages.



2200 Second Street SW, Suite 300, Rochester, MN 55902
Phone: (507) 282-1027 E-mail: info-fs@FirstSteps.us
Web: www.FirstSteps.us