

Power Struggles: Creating a “Win” for the Parent-Child Relationship

It’s no wonder that power struggles are such a common part of family life. Parenting involves a continuous dance about who is going to do what, when. Doing this dance requires merging the wants and expectations of both parent and child. Of course, sometimes they collide. When they do, it often ends up feeling like a lose-lose for both of you, no matter who “wins.” You may be left feeling resentful, misunderstood, powerless, and not respected. Your child very likely is left feeling the same way.

Take a moment to consider your relationship with your child or children. How frequently do power struggles come up? Do they tend to be big or small? What might they be about? Do they involve a lot of emotion? Are they typically resolved peacefully or unpleasantly? How do they leave you and your child feeling about each other?

It might help to think about power struggles in a different way. **Every power struggle is an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with your child.** If, at the onset of a conflict, your goal is to create a “win” for the relationship, *as opposed as a win for yourself*, you are both likely to end up feeling empowered, respected and understood. These mutual feelings will help strengthen your relationship with each other.

Many of us, as we enter a power struggle, recall past parenting ideals: “Never let the child have the upper hand. Don’t spoil the child by giving him his way. Give her an inch; she’ll take a mile.” As these sentiments echo in our minds, we can hear the clucking tone of disapproval and shame for the undisciplined parent who allows such “errors.” This point of view powerfully asserts itself as “correct,” yet we find that it is not effective as it once may have been. Our parents may have been the absolute bosses, but the current parenting culture is different. It is less black-and-white (and in some ways more difficult), but we are enjoying more intimate and fulfilling relationships with our kids. Today, authoritative parenting is more about mutual understanding and collaboration. The following suggestions may be helpful in navigating your next power struggle:

1. Attend to your own feelings. You will not be effective unless you are calm and focused. Breathe, relax your muscles, and sloooow down your thinking. Consider taking a break and coming back to it when you’re both more rational.
2. Name what is happening for your child, and be transparent about your goal to collaborate. “Joining language” includes words like “we, us, our, and let’s:” “We’re stuck, aren’t we?” or “Let’s figure out what’s going to work for us.”
3. Summarize what your child wants: “You want to go to the movie because you read the book and because you want to be with your friends who are

going,” or “You really want to skip your nap because you are not done playing.” Though this may seem obvious, your child needs to know that you get it. Acknowledge and validate his or her wants: “This is really important to you,” or “I know you feel strongly about this.” Take your time with this. Then briefly summarize your wants or concerns. Allow your child the opportunity to think of a compromise.

4. Let go of the outcome. Whoaaa, that’s a big one. But, with the exception of safety, most issues *are* negotiable.
5. You are still the parent. You are not handing over control to your child, nor are you on equal footing with him or her. One of your roles is as the mediator between what your child wants and what’s important in your family: “You really love name-brand clothes, and we’re not really that kind of family,” or, “You don’t like having sunscreen applied, and part of my job as a dad is protecting you and keeping you healthy.” As mediator, describe the compromise you’re working on together: “I’d be okay with you not setting the table, but I want you to find another way to help with dinner. What are you offering?”
6. Try not to present your ideas as universally correct. This adds fuel to the fire. Kids intuitively know the “bottom line.” You may notice that they respond differently when your stance is clear (like with safety issues, financial constraints, or core family values), than when you are ambivalent or can recognize more than one possibility (which is a lot of the time!). If you’re ambivalent but are presenting your ideas as universally correct because you feel like you need to “win,” it’s going to be a rough power struggle.
7. Be willing to meet a bit more than half way in the compromise. Does the chore have to happen *right* now? Does he or she really have to eat the meal you prepared? Know that compromise may stir resentment in you. Know, too, that in compromising, you are modeling for your child how to be flexible. After all, when the conflict gets resolved, then your child has learned how to be flexible, too. Honor and celebrate that flexibility in both of you.
8. Hang in there. Being in the middle of a power struggle can be overwhelming. Avoid the temptation to “pull a power play” like using force or punishment. Likewise, avoid the temptation to give up and give in completely. While both of these actions may end the power struggle more quickly, they can diminish trust, empathy, and respect in the relationship, and they will pave the way for future non-collaborative power struggles.

You and your child have the ability to resolve most any power struggle together. The above strategies may not feel comfortable or natural right away. They may take trial and error, but the pay-off can be huge. Your child will develop the belief that conflicts with others can be resolved peacefully and respectfully. Imagine all of his

or her future relationships – with co-workers, friends, significant others, children - which this belief will affect. Imagine his or her long-term relationship with you, feeling more and more respected, understood, empowered, and admired each and every time the two of you successfully navigate a power struggle. And – good news - your next opportunity is right around the corner.