

The Art of Avoiding Power Struggles

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Mom is in the kitchen preparing dinner. Ten-year-old Ryan asks for a candy bar. Mom says, absently, "Not right now. Dinner will be ready in an hour."

"Why not? I'm hungry now," Ryan insists.

"You know we don't eat candy right before dinner, Ryan!" Mom says irritated.

"Yeah, but I'm starving. Come on, just one little candy bar."

Mom stops what she's doing and turns angrily at Ryan. "I told you no candy before dinner and that's all there is to it!" The power struggle ensues.

Let's look at the difference between "authentic power" and "coercive power." Coercive power arises from judging children and situations as "bad" or "wrong". Force is used to manipulate our child to do what we want them to do. Force includes the use of guilt, threats, punishment, sarcasm, criticism, withdrawal of love, yelling, or nagging.

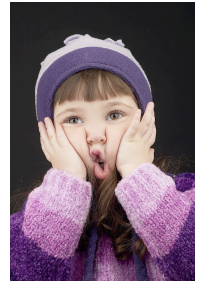
Coercive power motivates through fear instead of love and teaches children to be externally motivated rather than driven by their own set of rules or consciences. This forces children to look for outside sources to blame for their mistakes or for others to be responsible for their happiness.

Unfortunately, coercive power is very seductive because it often works in the short-term. It is how most of us were parented so we are comfortable with it. It is easy to use, but it seldom brings lasting results and strains our relationships. So, how do we stop using it?

Here are 10 ways to avoid power struggles. These are effective ways to use authentic power with your children that promote positive self-concepts and cooperation.

1. Use friendly action.

Frequently when we nag our children about what they should be doing, our children become "parent deaf." Use friendly action instead. For example, you ask your child to pick up his toys. He says, "In just a minute." A minute goes by and the toy still isn't picked up. Put a friendly smile on your face, bring your child over to the toy on the floor and walk away. Do not talk to avoid engaging in a verbal struggle.



2. Use one-word.

We make over 2,000 compliance requests daily to our children, "pick up your toys," or "brush your teeth," etc. Children begin to tune us out. Instead, use one word, like "toys" or "teeth." Make sure it is said in a friendly voice and with a smile. Tell your children ahead of time that you are going to stop nagging and that you will be saying one word from now on.

3. Give your child space.

If you make a request of your child and he refuses, it can be helpful to give your child some space. Some children need time to process and if given a little time, will do what we requested.

4. Teach your children to say “no” to you in a respectful way.

Were you allowed to say no growing up? If you weren't, did you find sneaky ways to say no? Like rebelling, or doing a job half-way. Teach your children to say respectfully, "No, I'm not willing to do the dishes, but I will clear the table." This creates an atmosphere of cooperation and support.

5. Give your child choices.

We all like to feel powerful and influential and our children are no different. Let them make choices that will give them control over what happens to them. For instance, "Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your blue ones?" or "Do you want to take your bath before your story time or after?"

6. Let your children know how valuable they are to you.

The more they feel valuable, the less likely they are to misbehave. Ask their advice on buying clothes, or how to decorate your home. Have them teach you a game or a fun activity.

7. Use win-win negotiation to resolve conflict.

In a power struggle the most effective negotiations are when both sides win and are happy with the end results. It can be challenging since you must listen intently to what the other person wants while staying committed to what you want. Ask your child, "I see how you can win and that's great, because I want you to win. How can I win, too?" When children see you are just as interested in seeing them win as yourself, they are more willing to cooperate.

8. Brainstorm solutions to the struggle.

The idea is to get wild and crazy and to never discount someone else's idea. Together, write a list of solutions. Give the list to your child first and allow her to cross off the ones she doesn't like. Then you have the opportunity to cross off the ones you don't like. Usually there will be two or three suggestions left the two of you can agree on. This is a wonderful problem-solving method and with enough practice, it can be done quickly.

9. Give your child appropriate ways to be powerful.

We all want to feel powerful and if we don't have opportunities to do it appropriately, we will create ways to feel powerful that are inappropriate--like power struggles or picking on siblings. In the middle of a battle, stop and ask yourself, "How can I give my child more power in this situation?" It might be as simple as asking him for his help or putting him in charge of a responsibility.

10. Make it fun and enjoyable.

For example, try singing "no" instead of using an admonishing tone. Use a cartoon character's voice like daffy duck to get your toddler to respond to your requests. Fun melts even the most resistant hearts.

If a child feels valued, loved and respected, he will want to cooperate with you. Use any or all of these suggestions and see what a difference it makes!

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