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## Parent-Child Power Struggles: How to Handle Them

*by Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist*

Battles between parents and children about who is going to do what and when is as old as life itself. These power struggles test parental patience, endurance, and common sense. The parent is often at wit's end with the child's continual demands and over-stepping the expectations the parent has about the child's behavior, how they dress, what they eat, and how they talk. Yet these challenges are a normal part of life as parents and children struggle in raising each other. As the years go by, the arguments may change from "not eating enough vegetables" to "living with someone outside of marriage." Both the parent and the child want to "win" and neither seems flexible enough to compromise.

What causes these unpleasant struggles? The child is torn between the need to become their own person and become independent, and their dependence on mom or dad for guidance and support. The parent wants the child to become a self-reliant individual, yet has a hard time letting go. The good news is that power struggles are a child's healthy desire for autonomy and identity. The question the parent must ultimately ask is, "Do you want to have a passive blob or do you want to have a child who can think for himself?" Of course the parent wants a confident, independent child, but for some, the wearing of nose rings or shaving one's head is a bit much.

To help the parent to cope, here are some effective techniques to cut down on the number of power struggles, and perhaps circumvent them altogether.

1. **Stay cool, and remember who's in charge.** When the parent gets into a power struggle and overreacts, they lose authority over their children. Parents convey genuine authority by keeping their cool. When they overreact, they lose it.
2. **Establish a few ironclad rules and stick to them.** Decide on four or five nonnegotiable demands that reflect your personal values and practical goals, such as: **No hitting. No TV until homework is finished. Put your dirty dishes in the dishwasher.** Don't wrangle over details or negotiate. Simply say, "Sorry, that is against house rules." And drop it. Often kids will try to outwit you and start another argument. Don't over-explain and don't renegotiate. Just point to the list.
3. **Focus on what really matters.** Many power struggles are not worth the hassle. Does it matter if their bedroom is not ready for company? Would it be the end of civilization if they played one

more round of Nintendo®? Would it stunt their growth if they wore sloppy clothes and oversized tennis shoes without shoestrings? Of course not. Knowing when to forgo an argument is one of the keys to successful parenting. Keeping battles to a minimum and concentrating on issues that genuinely affect the child's well-being is critical.

4. **Have realistic expectations.** Part of establishing simple, nonnegotiable rules is making sure you have realistic expectations. You can't expect kids to behave like adults (they don't always behave that well either). Understand age-appropriate behavior.
5. **Establish an environment that encourages your kids to go along with your agenda.** Classic power struggles revolve around *body issues* — sleeping, eating, toileting, dressing. Offer limited choices in each of these areas that guide your child toward your goal and that gives him/her a sense of power, even if the choices are limited. Also, look for opportunities to support and agree with your child. Watch your knee-jerk inclination to say no.
6. **Spend positive time.** The parent should spend at least 10 minutes a day alone reading or playing with the child. Also, the parent could spend an additional 30 minutes a week playing with the child — games, sports, fishing — doing something the child wants to do. If power struggles are often rooted in a lack of attention to the child, these positive attention activities can strengthen their interaction and lessen the impact of potential parent-child conflict.
7. **Get into your child's rhythm.** Being rushed is not compatible with a child's natural rhythm. The dawdling, which is seen by the parent as a challenge to their authority, is normal for children. Time runs much slower for kids than the hectic pace of working adults.
8. **Avoid disagreements when pressed for time.** Stress and fatigue, on the part of either the parent or child, can turn a benign disagreement into a full-blown power struggle. When fresh and mellow, seemingly inane comments or requests can be handled. When either is tired or stressed out, the same comment or question can trigger heated debates.
9. **Be creative.** Power struggles may evaporate if you figure out how to creatively obtain your child's cooperation. If cleaning their room is a problem, set a timer and have a 10-minute cleanup blitz, with an agreement that you will stop precisely when the buzzer sounds. Or, let your children help out while you are in the kitchen.

Remember, being fair and firm and helping your child to become independent and autonomous is not an easy task and requires considerable time and patience.

The parent must be creative in preventing or averting a potential power struggle. Look at the questions below and ask yourself, "Is this power struggle worth having?"

### **Is This Battle Worth Fighting?**

1. Is my child's health or safety at stake?
2. Am I fighting for a deeply held value?
3. Am I worried about others' opinions?
4. Is this a body issue? sleeping? eating? dressing?
5. Is my resistance a knee-jerk reaction?
6. Do the benefits to my child (a sense of mastery, a new learning experience) outweigh the negatives?
7. Is my child's behavior violating an established household rule?
8. Can I accommodate my child without compromising my own beliefs?

If you answered yes to questions 1, 2, 6, or 7, it's probably a battle worth fighting. If you answered yes to questions 3, 4, 5, or 8, let it go. It's not worth the energy or aggravation.

**Source:** Deborah Kent, author of "Power Plays — Your children will always try to test the limits of your authority. Here's how to be fair — and firm" (*Working Mother*, July/August 1996).

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