

13 Best Tips Ever for Avoiding Power Struggles with Your Child: Plus, 5 Ways Out of a Power Struggle

By Parenting Perspectives

Few things push our buttons as much as asking our child to do something and receiving an emphatic “No!” This one word is often enough to instantly catapult a peaceful moment into a disastrous confrontation. What most of us don’t realize is we’ve often inadvertently set up the power struggle before the fatal “no” is even uttered.

Feeling *powerful* is a normal and healthy need for both adults and children. Because adults make the rules, many children feel that much of their life is out of their control. When children are told what to do, or what not to do, they often take that moment to exercise their power and independence by refusing to cooperate. As children push against parent’s requests, many parents push back with demands, explanations, threats, punishment, yelling, nagging, and lectures-- all intended to force the child to comply. This interaction is the perfect recipe for a power struggle where parents and children find themselves locked into opposing positions. Each party desperately fights to save face, maintain their *power* and win. Sadly, the result is often “lose-lose.”

What follows are practical tools to help parents avoid power struggles before they begin and methods to extricate yourself if a power struggle does occur. Each tip is designed to create a climate where your child is likely to comply with your request because each strategy either meets a child’s normal need for power or helps the parent avoid stepping on the child’s power.

Ways to Prevent Power Struggles:

- 1. Plan Ahead** - Give notice of time. *Example: “we’ll be leaving the playground in 5 minutes so finish up”.*
- 2. Allow child time to comply after making a request-** Parents often make the mistake of expecting their children to act immediately and then getting angry when they fail to do so. Give your child a bit of space after your request so that they can choose to comply.
- 3. Empathize-**Put yourself in their shoes and see life from their perspective and then communicate to them how they are feeling. Let them know you understand how they feel even if you are not going to let them have their way. The key is recognizing and reflecting their feelings. When children feel understood, they are less likely to pick a fight.
- 4. Set limits-** Follow the “1-2-3 Plan” for Limit Setting (discussed on our blog-or schedule an appointment with Lauren or Karen to learn this essential parenting tool).
- 5 .Be firm and kind and follow through-**Balancing a “firm & kind” tone will get the best results.
- 6. Make Agreements Ahead of Time-**When children agree to something in advance, they are more likely to adhere to it. If they “forget” their agreement, follow the “1-2-3 Plan” for Limit Setting.
- 7. Use less words-**Parents tend to talk way too much. Sometimes it’s our words that get us in trouble. Use as few words as possible to communicate. Sometimes even one

word is enough. For instance, if your child knows it is time to pick up their toys, a parent may be able to just say "Toys."

8. Use a calm tone- Children respond to a parent's energy. Because, our tone holds energy, the calmer parents are, the more likely they are to get cooperation from their child. The opposite is also true.

9. Watch your words/Avoid using the words "no" and "don't"- It can help to avoid using words like "no" and "don't." For some children, just hearing these words, is enough to set up a power struggle. Find alternative ways to say "no" (see enforceable statements below). "Playing with paints right now probably isn't the best idea. Let's find something else to do."

10. Use enforceable statements—Parents don't have control over their children, but they do have control over their own words and actions. Use statements that communicate what you are willing to do or not do based on their choices and actions. "Feel free to have dessert after you've eaten your healthy foods." Or, "Going outside sounds like a great idea after your room is clean." This way the child makes a choice and the parent knows exactly what to do or what not to do.

11. Let child have the last word - If the child is doing what is asked, do not comment on *how* it is being done. Even if they are expressing themselves negatively, just let it go. Children have the right to their feelings.

12. Pick your battles- It's not worth arguing with your children about everything. Decide what is most important to make an issue of.

13. Make it fun-Children love to have fun and are more cooperative when they are experiencing joy and connection. Parents can choose to make the "mundane" fun with silly words, faces and humor.

Strategies for Getting Out of a Power Struggle:

Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of a Power Struggle we didn't see coming and need a way out.

1. Side step / Let go – It takes two to fight. "I expect the chores to be done" and calmly walk away.

2. Empathize - "I understand you really want to play with your friends, but the chores need to be done first."

3. Offer choices – By offering choices, we give children a sense of power and control. "Would you like to start by picking up the toys or loading the dishwasher?" or "Will you be doing your chores before or after dinner?"

4. Find useful ways for the child to feel valuable and powerful – When children feel valuable and powerful they are more likely to be cooperative. "I could really use your help getting dinner on the table."

5. Do the unexpected- When you turn on the music and have a dance party while cleaning the playroom or make a basketball game out of putting the clothes in the dryer you just may find your children having fun while doing exactly what you expect of them.

Over the next few days, begin adding these tools to your "parenting toolbox." Pick one of two at a time and notice the shifts within yourself and your relationship with your children. When parents become adept at side-stepping power struggles and knowing how to get out of them when they occur, life at home becomes much more peaceful. Enjoy the deeper connection that these tools bring.