



Power Struggles

A Power struggle occurs when you find yourself debating the details of an issue instead of staying focused on the main issue.

With children power struggles occur when you find yourself: a) justifying the correctness of a rule or a consequence, b) arguing the details and the loopholes of a rule you have set or c) talking about the greater philosophical (i.e. life lesson) backdrop to an issue, rather than the issue itself.

Power struggles are frustrating because they upset the power balance between parent and child. Yes, there is a power balance and you should be the one in charge. Children and teenagers, especially, are fantastic at pulling you into power struggles. Sometimes, parents get themselves into power struggles all on their own.

Here are some simple rules to save yourself from setting up dynamics where power struggles are possible.

1. Set behavioral expectations in advance - *"Your homework needs to be done before the TV gets turned on."*
2. Set consequences in advance - *"If the TV is on and your homework is not finished you lose TV for the rest of the day."*
3. Spell the rules out- write them out if you have to - write a contract, a rule list...
4. State a rule, and expectation or a consequence, don't ask or plead - *"No more TV today, your homework was not finished."*
5. Don't go back on what you said - i.e. *"Well... I guess it was just one math problem, and you have been behaving so I guess you can watch your show, but in the future, remember..."*
6. Set this expectation in your house: **Once it is said there is no negotiating !**

What if you still are faced with a power struggle?

1. Don't justify your rule (i.e. *"You didn't say I had to tell you where I was going after Molly's you just asked where I was going when I left home. It is not fair, you didn't say so."* *"Well honey, but you know that..."*)
2. Don't debate a point - Your word is law!
3. Try using a disarming statement:
 - a. Your child attempts to negotiate - *"Nice try!" "I see, well this is the way it is," "We can go with what I set, or I can make it worse...."*
 - b. Your child says you are so mean, they hate you, no one else's parents do this- *"I am sorry you feel that way," "Thanks for sharing your feelings," "That might be..."*

- c. Your child argues a very long winded philosophical point – “*hmmmmm,*” “*uh huh,*” “*I see!*” but don’t argue back.
4. Don’t argue back
5. Don’t change your rule or consequence
6. If you feel yourself getting angry or overwhelmed walk away

As you set and enforce your limits remember: Speak with a firm but kind tone, being strong doesn’t mean yelling, or threatening, or getting angry.

The bad news: This takes a while to learn. We all get caught up in power struggles because we all want to be liked, want to be right, and want to be understood. You can’t always be liked as a parent; if your kids are never upset with you are probably doing something wrong. You may or may not be right, but once you set a consequence it is set, no need to prove you are right. They don’t need to understand, you don’t have to make them understand. Sometimes things are just the way they are because you said so. This does not mean you have to be tyrannical, arbitrary or harsh. Remember to speak calmly and lovingly.

The good news: the more you practice this, the better you will get at it. The more you practice it the less your children will argue with you, because they will realize that it leads them nowhere. Even if you start off getting caught in a power struggle you can implement these skills mid-argument.