



Pow-er strug-gle (noun): An unpleasant or violent competition for power; refers to people in a relationship fighting about who is in control, with both trying to dominate the relationship in one way or another.

This edition of my newsletter focuses on how to avoid this unpleasant little dynamic that is not what most of us had in mind when we dreamed about having children, but it's one almost all of us have fallen prey to with varying frequency and intensity. Power struggles are hard to avoid. Children are experts at drawing us into them. But it's worth the effort as these tugs-of-war result in endless frustration and are detrimental to both parent and child. When a power struggle ensues, nobody wins.

The following are some guiding principles for avoiding power struggles and instead helping your young child to make good choices:

- **Seeking power is developmentally appropriate.** Young children are not doing anything wrong or misbehaving when they try to get their way or fight for what they want. It's our job to guide them in acceptable ways to assert control. They can choose whether to brush their teeth before or after reading a book, but not whether to brush their teeth at all. They can choose to either eat all of their breakfast or take what they don't finish in a to-go container, but they can't obfuscate and eat a bite a minute to try to prolong mealtime to avoid going to school and make everyone in the family late.

- **Your job is not to control your child, nor can you control your child.** You can't make them do anything: eat, talk, pee in the potty, not call you names, not have a tantrum. Your job is guide your children to make good choices. You do that by providing clear limits and boundaries that shape their behavior.
- **Young children thrive on clear limits and boundaries.** Protracted negotiations and inconsistent expectations cause confusion and are an obstacle to children making good choices. That's why kids often do better at school or child care versus home. Group care providers run very tight ships in order to maintain a calm and safe environment. The rules and limits are crystal clear, they are not porous. There are no negotiations or "gray" areas. If they clean up their toys, they get to choose new ones. If they don't put their coat and backpack in their cubby, they don't get to be the line-leader. Knowing exactly what to expect makes children feel secure. They know what to do to be successful. This teaches them to become strategic—to make good choices that serve them well—versus relying on manipulation.
- **Don't judge a limit by your child's reaction—aka *don't fear the tantrum.*** Just because your child doesn't like a limit doesn't mean it's not good for her. The tantrum is just your child's way of saying she doesn't like your rule and is feeling frustrated or disappointed that she can't have what she wants. Don't expect a "thank you" for limiting your child's sugar intake, screen time, etc.
- **Don't take the bait.** Young children are highly skilled at tuning into what yanks their parents' chains and gets them in the jugular—otherwise known as "bait". While this feels so wrong, and exasperating, children are just trying to figure out how to gain the control they so desperately want and yet have so little of. Any reaction from you puts them in the driver's seat and reinforces the behavior, even if your response is negative (which is naturally confounding to parents). The best way to respond to bait? Ignore it. Behaviors that don't get a reaction tend to decrease. This doesn't mean you

ignore your child. Instead, address the underlying feeling but don't engage around the provocative behavior. For example, in response to his dad telling him that TV time is over, the child shouts: "I am going to take your voice box and throw it in the trash!" (True story) Dad responds: "I know you hate when the TV goes off. You love your shows. But that's our family rule: one hour of TV. When you're done being mad and are ready to read a book together, let me know."

- **Impose limits that you can enforce and not ones that depend on your child's cooperation.** Any time you are trying to convince your child to do something, she is in control and driving the proverbial car. For example, insisting that she stays in her bed at night or that she doesn't get up from the dinner table before mealtime is over. But you can put up a gate to ensure she stays in her room and enforce a rule that leaving the table means her mealtime is over. Kids give up strategies that don't result in their desired outcome.

Most importantly, ***have a plan for how you'll respond to your child's unacceptable demands.*** When you don't have a plan, that's when things tend to fall apart. Parents are more likely to become harsh and threatening and end up participating in and amplifying the struggle in a desperate attempt to gain back control. When you have a plan, it enables you to stay calm and loving while setting clear limits and avoiding power struggles.