

## Avoiding Power Struggles

Neither side really wins in a power struggle. If you feel yourself being pulled into a power struggle, take a step back, remain calm and use some tactics to interrupt escalating anger and to de-escalate the potential confrontation.

You must remain calm. If you raise your voice, become visibly angry or attempt to intimidate the child you may only succeed in making the behavior worse. Any power struggle involves two people, so if you refuse to be drawn into one, then it can not occur. **To disengage** you can:

- Try some calming techniques for yourself. Take a deep breath and release it slowly. This will give you time to think and plan a more appropriate response to the behavior. You will also be modeling a behavior that the child can learn.
- Respond in a calm voice. If you speak calmly, you are more likely to convince the child and yourself that you are calm in a stressful situation.
- Keep your response brief. This gives the child less control over the interaction and reduces the opportunities for a child to respond with disrespect or refusal. Also, you are not inadvertently offering attention that he may desire.
- If the child says something significant that you don't feel like you can ignore, state in a brief neutral manner why it was inappropriate, suggest an alternative, and move on.
- Watch your body language. Make sure you are not betraying your inner feelings of anger and frustration with your non verbal movements and body positions.
- A child is likely to mimic you in tone and volume of voice and in nonverbal messages. You must model your expectations of the child. Respect them the way you want to be respected.

To **interrupt the escalation** of anger or defiance, you can:

- Divert attention away from the conflict. Bring up a positive topic like a book or an interesting toy or activity.

- Change the setting where the behavior is occurring. Go to a different room or move outside. That alone is sometimes enough to defuse a situation.
- Allow for a “cool down” break for yourself or the child. Move to a location away from each other and give yourself or the child a chance to calm down. If you move to your bedroom, for instance, instead of trying to move the child, you are modeling an alternative way to handle a potentially unpleasant situation. State that you need some quiet time before you discuss the behavior and the consequences.
- Paraphrase in your own words why you think a child is upset. Examples might be “Are you telling me that....?”, “It sounds to me like you...” This shows respect and that you are trying to understand. This can be extra helpful with a child who may have trouble expressing his needs.
- Ask open-ended questions(questions that require more than a yes/no answer) to better understand the problem. Avoid why questions since they can cause frustration because they imply you are blaming the child and he may not be able to explain why he is behaving that way.

There are several strategies **to de-escalate a situation**. This doesn't mean that there are not consequences, but they can be imposed after the situation is calmer. To reduce anger and help instill a calm atmosphere, you can:

- Use positive words in a request instead of negative ones. Say “I can help you as soon as you stop screaming.” instead of “If you don't stop screaming, I won't help you.” The first is a much friendlier statement.
- Use nonverbal strategies to defuse a confrontation. People tend to mirror the behavior that they observe. So, if you lower your voice or stand with open palms you are more open to conversation than if you start yelling and folding your arms or towering over a child in very close proximity. Eighty percent of our communication with another individual is nonverbal communication.
- Acknowledge that the choice is the child's to make. Calmly state the choices available and the consequences of each. It is recommended that you state the negative, or non-compliant choice first, and then the positive choice. For example, “You will lose the iPad if you do not stop yelling, or you can tell me quietly what you want and then you can have the iPad. The choice is yours.”
- If the child is old enough, ask if they can think of another choice to solve the problem. This teaches them that there can be a positive means to resolve conflict.
- You might be able to use humor with certain children as long as you are not sarcastic or demeaning. You will still need to talk later about the behavior.

- Label the emotion that the child seems to be conveying. You may not know for sure what the child is feeling so you can say a child seems or appears....

*Love and Logic* specialist Jim Fay proposes four key principles that affect behavior and a child's ability to grow and develop strategies for obtaining his needs. You will avoid or reduce power struggles by following these principles.

- A basic tenet is that a child should always be treated with respect and dignity. He should understand what is happening, what the goal is, and what is the consequence. A child needs to understand his role in the process and the outcome.
- Try to understand what the child is trying to communicate by his behavior and what he is feeling. Ask what he believes should happen when his behavior is like this.
- When a child makes a mistake, he will learn better from his mistake if he believes that what happens to him is a result of his actions.
- Whoever is creating the problem should be part of resolving the problem.

A child often behaves based on the view he has of himself. What you feel about yourself is not necessarily what others believe. Therefore, a child may act out to either hide a weakness he believes he has or hurt others for creating a situation instead of accepting his responsibility.

When a child makes a mistake it is often easier to blame someone else or something else. This is harder when the connection is drawn between behavior and the logical consequence of the action. Empathy and consequences together are more motivating to make a change. <https://www.loveandlogic.com/pdfs/empathetic.pdf>

Having to help solve the problem is much easier if everyone is calm and takes time to think of solutions. The child also learns self-control and how to solve problems.

A child wants to feel like he has some choices, some control. Therefore, shared control is very important.

Always be sure that the child understands that his behavior is not acceptable, but you love him.

If this is too much to attempt all at once, then pick one strategy to conquer before trying another. The degree to which the strategy can be used will depend on the age and

ability of the child. However, the underlying strategies and tenets can be used with all children.

Resources:

Turn your words into gold.

<https://www.loveandlogic.com/articles-advice/effective-responses-statements-for-parents-turn-your-word-into-gold>

Helpful CD for avoiding power struggles.

<https://www.loveandlogic.com/avoiding-power-struggles-with-kids-1>

A comprehensive list of issues and solutions.

<https://www.loveandlogic.com/articles-advice/parents>