

Power Struggles

What Is Considered Typical?

Anyone who spends time with toddlers or preschoolers knows about power struggles. Quite often they are signs that a child has realized that by saying no, they can control when and how things happen.

Power struggles are usually about a child exploring the healthy boundaries you provide for them. Your child may be thinking, “You asked me to wear the blue dress, but I want to wear my swimsuit to school.” Young children have very little control over their lives. Recognize this and give your child control in some areas—they may surprise you. For example, your child may suggest that she wear the suit under her dress—crisis averted!

What Strategies Are Helpful When Managing a Power Struggle?

A big piece of power struggles is clear expectations. Ask yourself if your child understands what is expected? Another factor is whether your child is developmentally able to do what is being asked. For example, expecting a 3 year old to sit still through a formal dinner is probably not realistic.

When power struggles do occur, remember that it takes two. When the parent is the other person, they sometimes need to let go of some of the control. That doesn’t mean that children should be allowed to decide what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. But it does mean that children should have some chance to express their individuality. For example, some children want to choose their clothes but it takes too long and they sometimes pick things that aren’t practical. A little planning (have your child select clothes the night before) and organization (separate play clothes from school clothes) can avoid a struggle that could take longer than it would take to choose the clothes.

What If a Child Is in Danger?

Sometimes power struggles arise when a parent is trying to ensure a child’s safety. Even then, there is usually an opportunity to allow choice. Here’s how it might sound: “I see that you hit Jordan with the truck; trucks are for driving, hauling, and racing but not hitting—you’re all done with that truck now. You may read a book or play with the blocks instead. You may try again later to play with the truck.” Allowing a second chance helps the child maintain their sense of independence.

Are There Times to Be Concerned About Power Struggles?

If power struggles happen repeatedly or if you become concerned about your child’s power struggles, keep a log of how often they happen and how intense they are. Also make a note of how your child acted. If you do talk with someone about managing power struggles, the more information you have, the better chance you’ll have of figuring out how to avoid them.

In some cases, your physician may refer you and your child to a mental health professional for counseling, support, and training in how to work out power struggles. The mental health professional will also be able to tell you whether the power struggles are an indication of a more significant emotional problem in the child or even in the adult.

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It seems like children really know how to “push buttons.”

When this happens, your child is likely getting a need met. Maybe they are trying to practice a new skill, testing their independence, or just seeking your attention.

Identifying the source of the struggle can often be the key to the resolution.

Allow your child plenty of opportunity to perfect new skills and let your child make some choices.

If your child really needs your attention, spend time reading or playing. If you can’t right away, let your child know when you will be able to play.

Helpful Tips

- Don’t become part of the struggle—identify the problem and help find a solution
- Give second chances
- Set clear expectations
- Speak calmly and respectfully
- Offer choices and follow through
- Use an interested voice, not a punishing voice

