

Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

The Art of Avoiding Power Struggles



BY KIM DeMARCHI

A power struggle is when a person holds one position and another person holds a different position and both are unwilling to change their positions. It is rarely about the issue at hand. It is about feeling powerless and wanting to feel more power within the situation.

Most of us were parented with coercive power which uses force, guilt, punishment, criticism, yelling, nagging, or withdrawal of love. It motivates through fear, instead of love. Unfortunately, many parents use this type of power to get their children to do what they want because it often works in the short-term and it is what most of us know from being parented. It, however, rarely brings long term results, and in the process, destroys parent-child relationships. So, how can parents avoid getting pulled into full blown power struggles?

1. Do less talking and more friendly action

Parents nag their children so much that they become “parent deaf”. If you ask your child to pick up her toy and she says, “in just a minute”, after a minute, put on a smile and walk her over to her toy. If she says, “what?”, just point to the toy and walk away. Once you start answering her questions, explaining, or negotiating, you have just opened the door to engage in a verbal power struggle.

2. Use one word

In the above example, that one word would simply be “toy”. To expand further, parents give hundreds, if not thousands, of compliance requests daily to their children, “brush your teeth”, “put your shoes away”, “take out the trash”, etc... Children will definitely tune out when they are feeling constantly bossed

around by their parents. Use a friendly voice and use just one word. They will know exactly what you want and need, for example, “teeth”, “shoes”, “trash”.

3. Give your child choices

Let your child make as many choices as possible so they have some control over what happens to them. There are 4 types of choices:

- **Concrete:** Do you want to take your bath before or after dinner?
- **Playful:** Do you want to hop like a bunny to bed or fly like an airplane?
- **Choice with an incentive:** If you brush your teeth right now, we'll have time for an extra story.
- **Choice with a consequence:** You can either get in the car seat all by yourself, or I can help you.

4. Let your child have the last word

Don't worry about having the last word with your child. Disciplining attitude can take a lot of time and energy. No one wins. It's more important to discipline behavior. Letting your child stomp up the stairs doesn't mean you lost the battle. One of my favorite quotes is “You don't need to attend every argument you're invited to.”

You'll know when it's a power struggle and you're invested in winning. But nobody wins. Just stop, take a breath, and remind yourself that winning a battle with your child always sets you up to lose what's most important: the relationship.



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Kim is active in supporting her local parenting community by providing workshops, coaching families and writing articles for our newspaper. Kim is a monthly guest on KATU's AM Northwest. She also blogs twice a month for Knowledge Universe's Kindercare online community. Kim's goal for you is to help reduce conflict, foster mutual respect, and create deeper communication and connections with your loved ones. She can be reached through www.EmpoweredParenting.com.