



So you want to know more about...

Power Struggles

Getting to "Yes"!

"This isn't supposed to happen until you're two!" parents often say when their infant first shows signs of "willfulness." The "terrible twos" is a misnomer for a couple of reasons. Classic tantrums start between 1-2 years, and true power struggles start even earlier and continue throughout childhood and adolescence.

The key to identifying and coping with power struggles at any age is understanding the basic force behind them. Children have very little power. We decide when and what they eat, what they wear, who they play with, and when they go to bed. We purchase the toys and decide when they'll be accessible. However, there are many ways that we *can* offer children power without compromising our standards or endangering them.

When you repeatedly lock horns with your child over what you see as a non-issue, ask yourself: how can I give my child some power in this situation? Children do not want ALL the power, just a bit. They still need you to set limits. Show them how to be safe, make friends, and be good citizens. Children simply want to feel like they are controlling some aspects of their everyday lives.

The best deterrent for **any** unwanted behavior is a consequence that is logically tied to the offense. When you are trying to address a power struggle, make sure the consequence fits. For example: your 3 year-old keeps throwing toys. Tell her that if she throws toys, they will be put away for a day, and follow through. When the toy comes out again,

remind her of the consequence before it becomes an issue. **Natural consequences** help kids see how their own actions affect outcomes. They give children power: a positive action they can take in the future.

With any age child, ask yourself:

- What components of this situation are up for debate?
- What is my bottom line here?
- What control can I afford to "give" to my child?

Even if "control" is not generally an issue for you, it becomes an issue for all children at some point in childhood. By being prepared, playing fair, and staying consistent, you can greatly reduce the intensity and number of everyday battles.

Does "might" make right?

It would sometimes be nice if it did! But grown-ups make mistakes, too, and children need to hear this. Use words like "That was a bad choice I made..." or "Next time I need to be more careful..." Taking responsibility for your own mistakes empowers children to admit theirs.

What about spanking? It isn't a "natural" consequence (see above), though it is a quick one. Unfortunately, it doesn't empower kids to make better choices next time, and the long-term goal is really better behavior and self-control.

"Do it because I said so!" What adult hasn't uttered these words in a moment of frustration?! If you can prepare more specific comebacks ahead of time, these situations can become "teaching moments." Try: "Because it is my job to keep you safe!" or "So we can get there on time!" Don't feel like a failure if you blow your top. Just plan to do a better job next time!

Further reading

- *Who's in Control*, by Dr. Lawrence Balter
- *Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma*, by Nancy Samalian
- *Jesse Bear, What Will You Wear?* by Nancy Carlstrom

Ages & Stages

Each age group has common issues for power struggles; here are some strategies for diffusing them!

Toddlers

- **Issues:** eating, sleeping, toilet learning, “sharing” (they can’t!), throwing or other experimental aggression, limit testing.
- **Try:** giving 1-2 choices for hot issues; distraction; redirection.

Preschoolers

- **Issues:** toilet learning, clean-up, bad language, timeliness
- **Try:** giving them jobs; setting goals with them, redirection, plenty of reminders, 2-3 choices.

Younger Elementary Children

- **Issues:** clean-up, clothing, television limits, homework, safety issues.
- **Try:** charts with rewards; asking children to suggest reasonable limits; earning privileges; saying, “Can you suggest a better choice?”

Older Elementary Children

- **Issues:** clean-up, homework, language, freedom, chores, cleanliness, choice of friends.
- **Try:** establish rules with their input; have them determine consequences beforehand; loss of privileges for misbehavior.

Empowerment vs. “Wimping Out”

People who are unfamiliar with the empowerment approach may think we’ve gone spineless. Just to clarify, Gretchen’s House does not suggest that adults abdicate their role as authority figures.

All issues are *not* democratic: your preschool child must hold your hand in the parking lot, no discussion. But why shouldn’t he be allowed to pick the clothes he’ll wear each day? Set some parameters: “long sleeves and pants in winter,” and don’t worry about style!

Another chance for empowerment to take a wrong turn is when adults give too many choices or allow children

to negotiate *everything*. Children naturally test limits and will go as far as you let them. Sometimes they negotiate out of habit, when they are really just desperate to hear, “This is how things are going to happen.”

Make it clear to children which things are negotiable and which are not. Know your own standards and your child’s capabilities and state limits clearly. This empowers you to enforce your rules and empowers your child to meet your expectations. It’s a win-win situation!

Frequently Asked Questions

I’m having trouble deciding which things to negotiate. Any suggestions? All children function best with established routines, which provide a framework for flexibility. For example, don’t negotiate the actual bedtime, but you can negotiate which pajamas, how many books, etc. Just make one element negotiable.

My child seems to start power struggles in public when I am too embarrassed to stay firm. How can I avoid this? Although you may feel like a “meanie,” most other adults recognize and appreciate when a parent must hold the line. It doesn’t matter what people think, if you know you are making the best choice. Think about possible “worst case” scenes ahead of

time, and determine your response in advance. Try to identify patterns in behavior and vary one or more elements of the situation.

I feel uncomfortable about intervening when other children misbehave in public. If the behavior negatively affects you or your child, it is perfectly reasonable for you to say so. In a friendly but firm voice say, “Throwing sand hurts kids. You need to stop.” Chances are others are thinking the same thing as you, and that child and parent need to hear that the behavior is unwelcome. If the situation escalates, however, it may be safer to leave the scene.