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THE TUG-OF-WAR TRAP

NAVIGATING POWER STRUGGLES WITH CHILDREN

Have you ever found yourself in a standoff with a child over screen time, broccoli, or going to bed? Have you felt so irritated that you had to justify and argue over the simplest of tasks such as toothbrushing, wearing a coat or having peas for dinner? If so, you're not alone. Power struggles are a normal part of growing up—and parenting. But they don't have to feel like a tug-of-war. To help you with that, we will explore what might be behind power struggles and explore some alternative ways of responding to them that will hopefully increase cooperation and decrease frustration.



WHY POWER STRUGGLES HAPPEN;

- ⚡ Power struggles are **developmentally appropriate** and have purpose. This means that they are a natural part of development as children test boundaries and learn about independence. From toddlerhood through the teen years, saying “no,” negotiating, or resisting adult direction is often a sign that a child is learning to express autonomy, make choices, and understand their place in relationships.
- ⚡ Very often, children engage in power struggles when they are in a “compromised state”, when their **basic needs** are unmet. For example, when they are tired, hungry or thirsty. These ‘compromised states’ drain a child’s ability to cope with situations—we might consider uncomplicated or undemanding- making them more irritable and their behaviour more oppositional.
- ⚡ Unmet **emotional needs** can also cause a power struggle. When a child feels disconnected or lacking control, they may express those feelings through resistance, defiance, or negotiation. What looks like a battle over bedtime or screen time may actually be a cry for connection or reassurance. Children don’t always have the words to express how they feel so their behaviour becomes the language of unmet needs.
- ⚡ **Inconsistent parenting**—where rules, expectations, boundaries or responses change often—can be a major trigger for power struggles. When children aren’t sure what to expect, they may test boundaries more often, not out of defiance, but to seek clarity and control. This unpredictability can lead to anxiety, frustration, and a need to assert power through resistance.

You might not be surprised to read that control sits at the heart of most power struggles.

When children feel powerless—whether because of overly rigid routines, sudden transitions, or a lack of voice—they often push back in the only way they know how: by saying “no,” stalling, or digging in their heels. More often than not, these moments aren’t just about the task at hand; they’re about a child’s need to feel meaningful, seen, and heard.



Control also plays a big part in how adults respond to power struggles. When we feel challenged, we also feel like we are losing control. One of the most common ways to respond to that is with more control – more rules, more consequences... Unfortunately, this often only escalates power struggles.

So, try to see power struggles as signals: your child might be trying to assert independence, test boundaries, or express unmet needs. They might not be intentionally annoying and pressing your buttons. Very often, they can't help themselves in those situations.

That said, there is something that we can influence during a power struggle – us and our reactions. How adults respond to a power struggle can impact on whether a moment becomes a challenging situation or a learning opportunity. When adults react with immediate control - raising voices, issuing ultimatums, or insisting on compliance without explanation - children often respond with more resistance. This isn't necessarily because they are defiant, but because they feel unheard or overpowered.

On the other hand, if we lead with taking the time to pause, validate feelings, and offer choices within boundaries, we then model respectful communication. In turn, this can reduce the need for children to push back. However, this shift from control to collaboration doesn't mean giving in. It means creating space for shared problem-solving, offering choices, and setting clear, respectful boundaries that help children feel safe and empowered.

STRATEGIES THAT HELP DURING A POWER STRUGGLE...



Stay calm: number one priority during a power struggle is for you to stay calm and try to avoid escalation. Children often feed off their parents' emotional responses, so if you react with frustration or anger, it can escalate the situation. So, try to take a deep breath and collect yourself before continuing the conversation. Remember – you are modelling emotional regulation for your child, and an example of how you would like them to respond.



Be curious: when adults shift from reacting to wondering and asking “What’s really going on here?” instead of “Why won’t they just listen?” - it helps us be more empathic and understanding. Being curious helps us pause, observe, and explore the emotions beneath the resistance. Maybe the refusal to get dressed isn’t defiance, but anxiety about the day ahead. Maybe the shouting isn’t about the rule but about feeling unheard. So if your child refuses to get dressed, pause and ask, “What’s bothering you about this right now?” Empathy often diffuses resistance.



Use routines as anchors: it is a well-known fact that children thrive on routines. This is because they provide stability and predictability. But they also reduce decision making fatigue which is often a contributor to lack of cooperation and power struggles. When children know what to expect—whether it’s the bedtime sequence, the morning checklist, or the after-school wind-down—they feel safer and more in control, which reduces the need to push back. Routines also shift the dynamic from parent vs. child to parent and child vs. the plan. Instead of “You have to brush your teeth now,” it becomes “It’s teeth time—just like every night.”



Offer choices not ultimatums: one of the most effective ways to diffuse a power struggle is to give your child some sense of control while still maintaining the rules. Rather than issuing a strict command, offer them choices within the boundaries you’ve set. For example: “You need to clean your room, but you can either do it now or after you finish your snack. What works best for you?” This approach allows your child to feel like they have control over the situation while still respecting the rules. It also reduces the feeling of being controlled, which can help prevent resistance.



Use humour: as it can be a secret superpower in defusing power struggles especially with younger children. A silly voice, exaggerated reaction, or playful joke can defuse tensions and lead to connection in seconds. When a child is digging in their heels, laughter breaks the cycle of resistance and invites cooperation without confrontation. It shows children that you're on their side, not against them. Humour doesn't dismiss the issue—it softens it, helping both adult and child regulate emotions and re-engage with empathy. But use humour with care and don't use it in situations where your child is truly upset, as it may come across as dismissive.



Pick your battles and know when to walk away: Not every “no” needs a “yes.” Ask yourself: Is this about safety, values, or just preference? Save your energy for the moments that matter most. This is especially important if the power struggle is escalating and nobody is willing to budge. Let your child know that you're walking away to give them space to think, and that you'll revisit the issue later when everyone is calmer. To help you with this, remember that the goal is not to “win” the battle but to teach your child lessons about respect, responsibility, and problem-solving.

TO CONCLUDE...

Power struggles can be especially complex for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), as their responses may be shaped by sensory sensitivities, communication differences, or challenges with emotional regulation. What might seem like defiance or refusal could actually be a child's way of coping with overwhelm, anxiety, or a lack of understanding. For example, a child with autism might resist transitions not to be oppositional, but because the change feels unpredictable or distressing. Likewise, a child with ADHD might seem defiant when asked to get ready for school but what is behind it is struggles to sequence tasks and regulate emotions, especially under time pressure. Recognising these underlying needs—and adapting expectations, language, and environments accordingly—can help prevent escalation and foster trust. When adults approach these moments with patience, curiosity, and tailored support, they create space for the child to feel safe, understood, and empowered to engage more positively.

Finally, remember that power struggles aren't signs of failure—they're invitations to grow and provide opportunity to tackle the challenge together, as a team rather than working against one another. They don't reflect badly on adults but signal that a child is learning to assert themselves, test boundaries, and express needs, even if their method is messy.

However, if you find it hard to move away from power struggles on your own please do reach out to your child's school and share any concerns. Equally, remember that you don't have to suffer alone; please reach out to your child's school with your concern or to us. We are more than happy to talk to you.

**CHECK OUT OUR FREE PARENT
RESOURCES IN OUR FAMILY ZONE
FOR SOME DOWNLOADABLE
ACTIVITIES, USEFUL LINKS &
RESOURCES**

CLICK HERE 

As always, if you need any help with making this work for your family, please do reach out on marijana@move-more.org or jen@move-more.org. We are more than happy to help you.

#EveryChildThrives