



youth service bureau

Increasing Your Child's Autonomy - The Magic of Compromise

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Use these tips for decreasing power struggles and increasing your child's autonomy.

Adapted from <http://www.empoweringparents.com/How-to-Avoid-Power-Struggles-with-Defiant-Children.php>

It's a fact about growing up: as we get older, we crave more autonomy – freedom, independence, and the ability to make our own choices and decisions. As parents, one way we can help our children develop autonomy is by increasing their responsibility and accountability. By offering our children choices and communicating effectively to reach a compromise, our children can learn how to manage their newfound independence and function in adulthood successfully.

James Lehman, a child behavior therapist, developed 4 questions which should guide any conversation centered around a change or increase in power and independence.

1. **How will we know it's working?**
2. **How will we know it's NOT working?**
3. **What will we do if it's not working?**
4. **What will we do if it IS working?**

When a child is still able to meet his or her responsibilities, we as parents can tell that this increase in power and autonomy is working. So, we've added a question that should really be asked *before* any of the other ones: **"What responsibilities could be affected by this change?"**

Let's look at an example, provided by Lehman. A teenager wants to stay up an hour later and move his regular bedtime from 9:00pm to 10:00pm.

1. **What responsibilities could be affected by a new bedtime?**
Your responsibilities are to get up by 7:00am and be ready by 7:45 for school, and to be energized throughout the day so you can learn and stay focused. With this change, you are responsible for getting up at the same time and being able to focus throughout the day.
2. **How will we know if the new bedtime is working?**
We'll know it's working if you are still able to get up by 7:00am and ready to go by 7:45, if you are feeling energized throughout the day, and if you are not falling asleep by 9:00pm.
3. **How will we know if the new bedtime is NOT working?**
We'll know if you have a hard time getting up by 7:00am, if you don't have enough energy during the day, and if you're already falling asleep by 9:00pm.
4. **What will we do if it's not working?**
We will go back to your old bedtime at 9:00pm and will revisit the issue in a month.

5. What will we do if it is working?

We will continue with this new bedtime.

You'll notice that there are no consequences if the new bedtime isn't working out. Since you're just trying out the compromise, it's okay to just say, "It's not working out. We'll try again." And, it's important to give a specific, reasonable timeline. ("We'll try this again in a month"). This shows your teen that you are willing to listen to their requests and try again, just once they have had more time to consider the responsibility of the change.

Lehman summarizes this best when he says, "That's how negotiations are supposed to go. They are carried out through the use of proposals, compromises and ways of measuring outcomes to make sure everyone is doing what they agreed to do. Understand that all these gradual gains in power for your child are really rungs on a ladder that leads to independent functioning, or adulthood. And what you want your child to know at the top of the ladder is how to solve social problems and functional problems, how to get along with other people and how to live the right values."

Resources

Lehman, J. (2009). Avoiding power struggles with defiant children: Declaring victory is easier than you think. Retrieved on August 12, 2014 from <http://www.empoweringparents.com/How-to-Avoid-Power-Struggles-with-Defiant-Children.php>