



youth service bureau

Power Struggles - Who's In Control Here?

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We've all been there before. A simple conversation with your teenager about chores turns into an argument. Your teenager says she will be home by 10pm curfew but calls home with an excuse and doesn't show up until 10:30. You're angry, your child is angry, and it never seems to end. Why is it that every day seems like a power struggle?

It helps to start by remembering what is happening as your teenager is developing. Teens are trying to gain control, autonomy, and power as they grow up. They are taking on more responsibility but are also realizing that they have the choice to do so or not. Their brains are still developing, especially the parts of the brain that regulate emotion, impulses, critical thinking, and decision making. They are now developing their own thoughts and opinions about things and no longer see parents as the sole source of information, or authority, in their lives.

Their immature development may lead to skewed perceptions of things. For example, brain scientists have found that adolescents are much more likely than adults to misinterpret facial cues and mistake fear or worry for anger. This is because they rely on the emotional part of the brain instead of the executive center (the prefrontal cortex, which continues to develop into adulthood). Although this doesn't give your teen permission or the right to let their emotions rule their lives, it's helpful to understand why your teen might think your expression of frustration with them is anger, which can lead to a fight you didn't even know you had started.

But, you're still the parent, right? You should still have control? **As a parent, you DO have certain rights.** You have the right to set limits and rules for your children, and you have the right to follow through on consequences of breaking those rules. You have the right to feeling safe in your home. You have the right to reduce or remove the privileges you provide for your children, such as spending money, transportation, or cell phone service.

However, as your teens grow and develop, **you ARE slowly losing control over them** and their behaviors and choices. You can't force them to go to school, do the laundry, or stop swearing. They have the power to make their own choices and decisions, and they will. As Dr. Marlo Archer puts it, **"When you honestly realize that your teen actually holds that power, you will stop struggling with them over it..."**

"Easier said than done," you might be thinking. And it's true – in the moment, it's harder to actually stop a power struggle from happening. But James Lehman, a child behavior therapist, argues that it's not the power struggle we want to take away – it's the *defiance* we want to take *out* of the power struggle.

"This is because as kids go through their developmental stages, they need to challenge their parents appropriately in order to get more autonomy. And parents, in turn, need to teach their kids that with autonomy comes responsibility and accountability... kids have to learn how to have power struggles with their parents in a way that is not a personal attack... ultimately we want kids to learn how to

advocate for themselves by engaging in actions and conversations which increase their autonomy—without getting them into more trouble,” says Lehman.

What this really comes down to is **effective communication**.

1. It's not what you say; it's how you say it.

Your tone of voice tells your child a lot. If you approach your child with an angry, frazzled tone, you appear weak and out of control. Instead, approach your child in a calm and controlled way. Likewise, demanding something of your child might not be effective.

The use of “I” messages may be helpful here. Instead of commanding or demanding things of your child, frame them as “I” statements using this formula:

“I feel _____ because/when _____. So, I need you to _____.”

Examples:

“I feel worried when you don't come home on time. So, I need you to stick to your curfew.”

“I feel like our home isn't being respected when the trash isn't taken out. So, I need you to contribute your part and take out the trash when I ask you.”

2. Don't escalate.

It's easy to let your emotions build and lead to an escalation of conflict. However, **the more you engage your child in an argument or power struggle, the more power you're giving him or her.**

If you need to, tell your child that you need a few minutes to calm down, but that you would like to continue the conversation in a moment. Kids appreciate the honesty, and your “time out” gives them time to calm down too.

3. Give choices.

As teens grow up, they want more responsibilities and control over their decisions. **Offering them choices provides them with the control they so desperately want, while still giving them the structure they so desperately need.** This also helps them practice problem solving and decision making skills.

Examples:

“You can either do your chores right away after school OR wait until after dinner.”

“You can have computer time from 3:30 to 5:00 OR from 7:00 to 8:30.”

4. Practice Active Listening.

Active listening to your teen includes maintaining eye contact, rephrasing and summarizing what you're hearing, reflecting on your child's emotions (“It sounds like you are frustrated”), noticing nonverbal cues, validating their opinions, asking open-ended questions, etc.

Active listening shows your teen that you are willing to listen to them and that you aren't going to make a decision until you've heard them out. "You may not ultimately agree, but listening increases the odds that they will listen back," says David Walsh.

5. Repeat the expectation, rule, and consequence only once – and follow through consistently

Repeating yourself over and over again isn't going to help diffuse the conflict. If anything, it causes you to seem weaker because you aren't standing firm and actually doing something.

If you need to, simply walk away. Say, "I've told you what needs to happen/is going to happen. I am not going to discuss this any further."

Finally, remember that "Nothing ensures a power struggle like your child's belief that he can't talk to you reasonably about something... it's important for parents to sit down with children and say, 'When you don't agree with me, this is how we should handle it.' **Invite them to talk to you about it.** At the end of that conversation remember to say, 'Whatever decision is reached, it's going to have to be acceptable. I'm not going to keep arguing with you. I'm just going to walk away'." – James Lehman

****Note: If you are a parent whose child is abusive, aggressive, and dangerous, especially during power struggles, you should seek professional help. Your safety is important, and remember that you have the right to feel emotionally and physically safe in your own home. In extreme situations, you have every right to contact the police. If you need support, contact the Youth Service Bureau and your local community's social services department.**

Resources

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