

SIX STEPS TO AVOID **POWER STRUGGLES** WITH YOUR CHILDREN



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This picture is used for illustrative purposes only.

Any person shown is a model.

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Does it get under your skin when your child or teenager won't listen to you? Maybe you ask yourself "Who's in charge?" You might want it to be you, but your child seems to be leading the way with his/her poor choices. You may feel unsure what to do when s/he lies or calls you names. Perhaps you worry how s/he will function in society with other authority figures. Maybe you wonder what your relationship will be like with your son or daughter when s/he is an adult. All you want is for your child to be happy, and yet, right now, no one is happy.

You are not alone. Parenting is one of the most difficult jobs you will have in life. Often times, parents end up in power struggles with their child and/or teenager and have no idea how that happened, let alone how to get out of it. Maybe you don't even realize you're in a power struggle until after the conflict is over. This is an easy trap to enter, especially since you likely believe you are the parent and your son or daughter needs to do as they are told.

It would be easier if your child would just listen; however, you can't completely control your child. S/he has the right to decide how s/he thinks, feels and behaves – just as you do. As difficult as this is to swallow, this is actually a good thing. Autonomy helps children prepare for independence, for when they don't have you to rely on as much as adults. If your child just obeyed your every command today, how would s/he learn to make his/her own decisions in the future? You can help your child strike a balance between needing you for every little thing and respecting you as a parent and authority figure. Read on to learn more about how you can smooth out power struggles with your children.

Change Your Relationship With Your Child

Instead of allowing conversations to grow into power struggles, consider the following steps as a guide to work through tense situations. When a potential topic of debate comes up start the following:

1

Stop To Reflect and Notice Your Own Feelings and Thoughts

You may need to stop the conversation to reflect properly. Reflect on your thoughts, emotions and behaviors. During times of conflict, we often get caught up in the moment and react from emotions before we have a chance to develop awareness of our internal responses to the people, places and things around us. This may be the hardest step of all – and yet the most powerful – in creating healthy conflict resolution skills when parenting your children. Taking deep breaths, taking a “time-out,” and talking yourself through the situation are some of the ways you can better cope with your emotions during these interactions. Your own reactions will be your biggest indicator as to how the conversation will likely end.

If you notice your emotions get triggered quickly, or seem to get triggered repeatedly in similar situations, then at some point, it will be good to understand where your emotions come from. Why are the conversations with your child so heated for you? If your child is not listening, does this remind you of when your parents or your partner does not listen to your concerns? In other words, why do these communication patterns trigger painful thoughts and feelings? A therapist may be best equipped to help you work through these issues.

2

REALIZE

the Difference Between Your Child’s Issue and Your Own

Many times when parenting, we take on stress that really belongs to our children. Often, this is where the power struggle begins. Maybe you believe your daughter should be doing something a certain way, then she disagrees and the tug-of-war begins. Or, perhaps your son has a test tomorrow and he has not prepared for it, and you may encourage him to study and question why he has not studied yet. By suggesting he should have prepared sooner and engaging him in a debate about this, you have taken on the stress for him. You are, perhaps, hoping that you can transfer your stress or worry to him, therefore provoking motivation for action (studying). Consider letting him feel the stress of not

being prepared for a test or the stress of losing a privilege. Allowing the school pressures and your expectations (not your persuasion) to give him the stressful feeling is better than shifting his attention from preparing for the test to resisting the “nagging” parent.

This step can be really tough for most parents, so if this is the case for you, then you are not alone. You want what’s best for your son or daughter, which is why you do this. In therapy, I can help you recognize what your parenting issue to focus on is and what is for your son or daughter to worry about is. Together we will work on an appropriate structure for your home as well as appropriate consequences/incentives where applicable. I will help you learn how to speak to your son/daughter so that you can remain focused and not get sucked into a power struggle again. This will likely be a difficult shift, but you can see improvement in your relationship and s/he will learn to be more accountable for his/her actions. All of the steps here can help you follow your new awareness with effective techniques.

3

REMIND

Remind your son/daughter of your expectations (include timeline) and the choices s/he has.

Set expectations within a reasonable timeline so that your child can get his/her tasks completed. Discuss with him/her the different choices s/he has in order to meet those expectations. Be sure to include wise choices and not so wise options. Do not negotiate what your expectations are – instead, help your child focus on choices within those expectations. Elicit his/her ideas about the possible outcomes of each choice. This will help him/her make an informed decision about what s/he wants to do. It will have a bigger impact if s/he comes up with the possibilities on his/her own, without you providing it all.

For example, your daughter refuses to take out the trash and clean her room, which is expected of her. If she does not complete them, then she will lose her phone for two days. While staying calm and recognizing that it is her decision, you remind her that her chores need to be complete before the end of the day. Acknowledge that her choices are to complete the chores or not. Maybe you ask her what the result would be if she does do them versus if she does not. Let her fill in the blanks. If she really does not know, then you can help her, but I suggest that you patiently encourage your child to contemplate the bigger picture regarding responsibility. If she really needs help understanding the consequences, then perhaps you inform her that by completing the chores she will be able to enjoy the luxuries she has (phone). If she does not complete her chores, then she will

lose the privilege to use the phone. (This would have to be an already known consequence-not one she makes up herself.) As long as your expectations are clear, you can decide the fair outcome for your child. Just be sure that you set the expectation and the consequences and that you follow-through with it.

Sometimes working through expectations can even include helping your child look at bigger picture things, such as his or her thoughts on work ethic and what kind of employee s/he wants to be. Would his/her decisions impact his/her work ethic or reputation around the workplace?

The toughest part of this step is to then walk away! Let your child decide what choice s/he wants to make. There is no need to engage in further conversation about the expectations for him/her or the results of each choice. It is what it is. It's okay if s/he does not complete the chores. The garbage will remain and s/he will feel the discomfort of not using his/her phone, for example, if it's not done. As a natural consequence of waiting to take the garbage out, perhaps the garbage bin now needs to be cleaned as well due to odor. You can help your child understand the long-term consequences of his or her actions.

4

RESOURCES

Help identify resources for your child.

This step can apply either during the time your child is deciding which option to choose for him/herself or after s/he has already decided. Ask your son or daughter if s/he needs help figuring out what resources s/he may need to carry out his/her plan. This will help him/her be accountable for his/her choices and success.

Sometimes, young people will make a decision because it is the easy thing to do or because they don't realize the resources available to them. Helping your child figure these things out will help him/her make an informed decision.

When your child is faced with a difficult decision, it can be a great idea to ask him/her to prioritize his/her goals, values and your expectations. After going through this process, it's important to let your child make his/her choice, even if you disagree with it. The important thing is that s/he has gone through an informed decision making process. S/he will learn a lot from this process, as well as from the choice s/he has made. It's your job to let him/her learn.

Sometimes figuring out resources means looking outside the box. Resources may include

tangible things, such as figuring where glue sticks can be found, or something more broad, such as identifying who/how to ask for help. Figuring out who, when or how to ask for help may be another resource that your child needs.

Therapy can help you and your child figure out the most applicable resources necessary to help carry out your child's plan. To help with this process, we will also identify your child's strengths and weaknesses. We would consider what your child is willing to do and what s/he'd rather not do as well. Sometimes there will not be any amount of resources that would get your son/daughter to do what is expected. That's when helping you know when to walk away and let him/her make her choice on his/her own. Support from a therapist can be particularly valuable when the young person tends to be strong willed. It is not easy to know when to walk away and avoid the power struggle.

5

Reassurance

Let your son/daughter know you understand his/her struggles.

Your son or daughter needs to feel understood, just like anyone else. It's important to give him/her this support. When we acknowledge how one feels, that validation naturally reduces the intensity of his/her emotions, therefore helping him/her to make a healthy decision versus an emotional one. In practice, you might simply help by identifying how your child might feel. For example, you may say, "I know this is tough. I can see that you're angry with the situation, and it makes sense why."

Talking about feelings can be an emotional experience for all those involved in the conversation. The most important piece of this step is to emotionally detach from your child's situation without giving him/her the impression that you are giving empty support. It is not your job to make your child's emotions disappear. I know it's hard to believe, but your child may be trying to use emotion to manipulate the situation. S/he may not even be doing this on purpose; however, since you love him/her so much, seeing him/her so upset may trigger you to give in or engage in a struggle to get him/her to see your side. Stay strong and balance that strength with support. I would suggest not staying in this part of the conversation for too long. It can quickly turn into more of a struggle.

6

RESERVE

Reserve the right to silence and space as needed.

This report gives examples of situations that go smoothly. Not all situations will be smooth. If necessary, resort back to #1 in this steps process. The beginning will likely be the most difficult time for this process. Your son/daughter will be testing the limits and perhaps unconsciously trying to engage in the typical, combative way of engagement and struggle. It will be up to you to change this dynamic by staying strong. You may even consider telling him or her that you are going to work on this whole process and that it would be good for him/her to do so as well. When both you and your child give it a try, you can improve your relationship.

You always have the right to stop the conversation if things become too intense or emotional. Role modeling emotion regulation is good for you and for your child. One important factor to consider is that this step process is fluid, meaning that you may use it in order, but you may also need to jump around in the steps based on what seems appropriate for the given moment in the conversation.

If a break is needed because you feel too much emotion coming on in the conversation, then simply and calmly explain to your son/daughter that you need a break to calm yourself down. Explain that you will return to the conversation when you both are better equipped to handle the topic with more ease. This may be difficult for your son/daughter to hear, and that's okay. If you are to remain in control of how this conversation goes, then it is crucial for you to manage your emotions effectively. Role modeling this will also help your child learn how to manage his/her own emotions effectively as well.

Case Study

**Please note:*

This example is not from a real-life, specific family. It is strictly an example of what some families may experience. This made-up example is only designed to help you better understand how these tips may help you with parenting.

The mom in the “Smith” family goes grocery shopping every Friday morning during the summer months. Since she is by herself with her three kids at this time of day, she brings her kids with her to the grocery store. Mom knows that this is boring for her children; however, if they want food in the house, it has to be done.

In preparation for the trip, she has her coupons, list and snacks for the kids ready. She believes these things will ensure that she can get in and out of the store quickly.

On the way to the store, her two oldest children begin fighting in the back seat. She begins to yell at both of them, telling them to stop. Her middle child, Casey, quiets down while her oldest, Lisa, argues with her. Mom tells Lisa that she is being disrespectful by arguing and that she needs to listen. Lisa listens for the time being. However, once they begin shopping, Lisa starts running around and touching everything in the store. Mom gets even more angry and tells her to stop. Unfortunately Lisa is not listening to Mom's repeated requests to stop. Mom's voice gets louder and louder as she becomes aware of the audience around her. She manages to finish shopping, but not without a scene. When she is loading the bags in the car, she begins to lose control of her emotions and yells at her her kids, particularly Lisa. The kids sit quietly at this point, but Mom later felt badly for not handling the situation differently.

I'm sure you've been in this mom's shoes before. It is no fun when your kids are not listening. It feels like they have control over the situation when you are trying to take charge yourself. Having situations like this one occur in public can be particularly challenging.

The 6 Steps to Avoid Power Struggles with your Children – along with the support of a qualified therapist – can help give Mom tools when presented with challenging situations like this. The first thing Mom could have benefited from was managing her own emotions. If she is upset, then the kids will likely feed off this negative emotion and continue as they were. Should Mom had taken a break from shopping to discuss with the kids their choices, it would have given the kids direction as to what they could do versus only what not to do. Mom could acknowledge how boring grocery shopping is for them and offer a few choices/jobs they could do to help in the process– for example, find and choose the items off the shelf and meet back up with Mom to add to the cart (age appropriate of course). Maybe they would need a store map to locate which aisle foods are in. She could have made clear to the children that they could behave in the store and keep the privilege of watching a T.V. show afterwards, or misbehave and lose this privilege. If the children chose to misbehave, then they also choose the consequences Mom laid out for them. These are examples to name only a few. It is difficult to think of these things in the moment, especially when dealing with the kids by yourself. However, with help, you can develop more effective ways of communicating with your kids, even when frustration is high.

MLB Therapy Can Help

I have been working with children and adolescents in a professional manner since 1999. My experiences have helped me gain great insight into family dynamics and how parenting influences the behavior of the children. While it's true that the parents are not to blame for their children's behaviors, parents can influence how things progress going forward. I strongly believe that while we can not control the behaviors of others, children and teens alike, we can influence their choices by how we, as adults, interact with them.

It is easy to get into a power struggle, which causes parents to question themselves. Understanding past dynamics between you and your child, considering ways in which you were parented and even understanding marital dynamics can help you gain insight into how things got to be the way they are. Rather than assign blame, we will work together so that you can learn from a high level of insight to shape future interactions, and therefore strengthen relationships.

In sessions, I am a big proponent of using humor with children, not to be confused with sarcasm. No one wants to be laughed at, so it's important to use humor in a way that no one is the butt of the joke. Humor can be a good way to get kids to better understand the role everyone plays and accept responsibility for their role. I also use a strength-based approach to highlight children's good intentions and their knowledge to help them see their parent's perspective as well.

It is best if everyone can have a say in how things go. I stress how important it is for both parents and children/teens to feel they can express areas they want particular family members to work on. Just as a parent would want their child to work on getting grades up, a teenager may want mom or dad to stop nagging so much. All is fair to talk about in sessions. With everyone's buy-in to treatment, you can make progress quicker and with more ease.

Families are the first place where children learn how to navigate relationships. I encourage families to interact the way they can be proud of, whether that's how parents treat their kids or vice versa. Thankfully, with some work on your part, your relationship can improve.

Reflect on Your Progress and Consider Resources As Needed!

This is not an easy process, so go easy on yourself if it does not go "right" the first time. Practice makes perfect! Try this process over the course of the month, and if it seems as though things are not improving, then consider contacting me, Michelle Bogdan with MLB Therapy, PLLC, for additional support.

Parenting is no easy task, so it makes sense if you need help. We all need help sometimes, and since you are directly involved in your child's struggle and situations, it would be more difficult to complete these steps on your own. Support from an objective, trained professional can be just what you need to make the process easier.

If you would like help in going through this process, or if you'd like to ask questions about how therapy can help with your parenting, or about my practice in general, feel free to contact me at (703) 554-2882. I offer a free 15-minute phone consultation if you'd like to discuss your specific situation.

Michelle Bogdan, LCSW has been working with adolescents and families since 1999. She graduated with her Master's in Social Work (MSW) with an academic concentration in Alcohol and Other Drugs in 2003 from the University of Buffalo, in Buffalo, New York. Prior to earning her MSW she worked in the Human Services field with Severely Emotionally Disturbed Adolescents. While her private practice, MLB Therapy, PLLC, opened in 2012, she has been providing therapy since 2003.