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**POWER STRUGGLES:
10 WAYS TO KEEP THINGS COOL!**

INTRODUCTION

Power Struggles: 10 Ways to Keep Things Cool! explores ways to effectively deal with power struggles with your young child. Power struggles happen. With a young child, power struggles can happen a lot. And they often happen at the worst possible moments—when parents are tired, stressed, and in a hurry. But there are ways to avoid and minimize power struggles. This article explores four ways to minimize power struggles before they occur and six ways to deal with power struggles in the heat of the moment.

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BEFORE-HAND

1. Give Choices

Most children go through their day having very little choice about their lives—when to get up, what to wear, how and where they will spend the day (whether at school, daycare, or a nanny), what they will eat, when they will go to bed. Sometimes power struggles can arise because children want more control over their lives.

Also, your child has a natural drive toward independence and wants to become their own person and run their own lives, making small and large decisions about their day. Often conflicts can arise because your child is asserting their independence, which is very growthful and important. Power struggles can also arise from this drive.

Giving your child choices throughout their entire day, choices about the all the many little things that are not of importance to you but may be important to them, can undercut the number of power struggles that your child starts. “Choicing” your child—giving your child lots and lots and lots of smaller choices—throughout the day can give them a sense of independence and a sense of control that often makes for more harmony. And this choicing helps when there are times where your child doesn’t have a choice about a larger issue and needs to cooperate rather than engage in conflict.

The following are examples of how to maximize choices for your child about issues that are less important.

“It’s time to wake up for daycare. Do you want to get out of bed now or five minutes from now?”

“Do you want to pour your breakfast cereal or do you want me to pour your cereal? Do you want to get a spoon or do you want me to get you a spoon? Do you want to listen to music during breakfast or do you want to talk?”

“Do you want to put toothpaste on your toothbrush or do you want me to put it on your toothbrush?”

“Do you want to take a bath tonight or do you want to do a wet washcloth rub tonight?”

2. Pick and Choose Your Battles: "Use THE Big 3 Family Rules"

RULE #1. EVERYBODY IS GENTLE WITH EVERYONE'S BODIES

This is a positive way of saying: no kicking, biting, scratching, pinching, choking, hair-pulling, punching, arm-twisting, tripping, etc.

RULE #2. EVERYBODY IS GENTLE WITH EVERYONE'S FEELINGS

This is a positive way of saying that your child should try not to hurt people's feelings with statements such as: "You're ugly," "You can't play," "You can't come to my birthday party," "I hate you" or "You're not my friend."

RULE #3. EVERYBODY IS GENTLE WITH EVERYONE'S THINGS

This is a positive way of saying that your child should respect other people's creations—by not ripping up their painting or knocking down their block castle—and that your child should respect other people's possessions—by not grabbing a friend's doll or breaking a sibling's toy airplane.

These three rules are so basic and so fundamental that they could be posted at The United Nations!

The first two rules are of primary importance because they address rules for social relationships; the third rule, regarding things, is of less importance for your young child to learn at an early age.

These rules can be posted pictorially, especially for your young child who is not reading. For Rule #1, you can have the number 1 followed by a photo or magazine picture of two children hugging or holding hands. For Rule #2, have a picture of children talking together in a friendly way. For Rule #3, have a picture of children playing together cooperatively. Refer to the rules as your child is exhibiting positive behaviors associated with the rules. "Great job, Garrett. You are using gentle hands with your friend as you are playing. Good job with Rule #1." "Your soft voice is so easy to listen to Carina. You are remembering Rule #2."

Beyond these three rules, perhaps add one or two or at most three other rules that change as your child grows. Too many rules make for too many unnecessary power struggles!

With your young child, it is a classic comment: "Pick and choose your battles" or you could be having power struggles 24/7. Your young child is testing their emotional strength and emerging independence with you. Many days are "Survival Days" when you ask yourself, "Is this a battle worth having?" Or "Will this matter a year from now?" In addition, if you are in constant battles with your child, we have to be honest with ourselves and ask the humbling question, "Am I the controlling person here? Am I an equal partner in causing these power struggles?"

3. Spend Together-Time

Together-Time can work wonders. Together-Time can be magical. All children want attention and for most young children negative attention is better than no attention at all. Sometimes your child may challenge limits and engage in power struggles as a way to get your attention. In order to ensure that the behavior is not negative attention-getting, being proactive about positive attention through one-on-one time can be very effective!

It is important to plan at least one or two times each week to focus solely on your child and to give them your undivided attention. This one-on-one time doesn't have to be doing a special activity or buying a toy—the best one-on-one time is playing with your child with their favorite games and toys.

Spending at least 30 minutes of quality time with your child several times a week creates a powerful connection for both you and your child. During this one-on-one time be sure to engage in the play that your child chooses and be sure to listen and follow your child's lead. Allow your child to direct the play. This is a time to hang out together and for you to understand your child on a deeper level.

Think of this time as a date with your child. You might give it a special name, such as Together Time, Dad and Daughter Time, Mom and Madeline Time, or, as one four-year-old girl calls it, Sparkle Time. Talk about it before—*"I can't wait to see what you want to do during our Rashid and Mom Time"*—and talk about it after—*"Clara, I smile every time I think of our Special Time together yesterday."*

During this Together Time your child should be the director of the play. You are observing and commenting, in a non-judgmental way, about the action. You are participating as your child wants—engaging with them and learning about them through their play. This is a time where you are totally tuned in to your child and joining with them in their world.

If there are siblings, this one-on-one time may be difficult to arrange as siblings shouldn't be present and shouldn't be able to interrupt. But if there are siblings, this one-on-one time is even more important.

At every parenting workshop I always talk about the importance of One-on-One Time. It is awesomely powerful. I have seen positive changes in a child's challenging behavior after two to three weeks of One-on-One Time, several times a week, with Mom and/or Dad.

4. Read Books about Children Misbehaving

Reading books with mischievous characters can provide an outlet for your child who is into negative-attention-getting and challenging behaviors. Books such as "Curious George" can provide an outlet for your child rather than a role model! Here are some good books that most children love.

- Carlson, Nancy, "Sit Still"
- Dr. Seuss, "The Cat in the Hat," "Green Eggs and Ham," "Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now"
- Elliott, Dan, "Oscar's Rotten Birthday," Sesame Street Books
- Everitt, Betsy, "Mean Soup"
- Gantos, Ralph, "Rotten Ralph" books
- Gauch, Patricia Lee, "Christina Katerina and the Time She Quit the Family"
- Hayward, Linda, "Mine!"
- Hazen, Barbara Shook, "Even If I Did Something Awful"
- Hughes, Shirley, "Alfie Gets in First"
- Hutchins, Pat, "Three-Star Billy"
- Lionni, Leo, "It's Mine!"
- Mitchell, Edna Preston, "The Temper Tantrum Book"
- Paton, Priscilla, "Howard and the Sitter Surprise"
- Rey, Margaret, "Curious George" books
- Root, Phyllis, "Contrary Bear"
- Sharmat, Mitchell, "Gregory, the Terrible Eater"
- Simon, Norma, "I Was So Mad!"
- Sykes, Julie, "I Don't Want to Go to Bed!"
- Wood, Audrey, "Weird Parents," "King Bidgood's in the Bathtub"
- Zolotow, Charlotte, "The Quiet Mother and the Noisy Little Boy"

IN-THE-HEAT-OF-THE-MOMENT

"It Takes Two to Tango" —Manning/Hoffman Song....."It takes two to tangle."—Irene Shere

Try these techniques in the heat of the moment to avoid engaging in a power struggle with your child. Often you as a parent need to untangle. Rather than pick up the gauntlet when it is thrown, decide not to engage in the power struggle. These tips can help you disengage, untangle, and redirect your child's energy and keep things cool in order to avoid a power struggle.

5. Ask "Why Not?" Rather Than "Why?"

If there is one thing that parents learn, it is FLEXIBILITY. Parents who aren't flexible are fighting an uphill battle. Sometimes it is best to internally examine your reflex to say "No" to a request or to a behavior. We often ask ourselves "Why is my child doing that?" rather than "Why can't my child be doing that?" (And sometimes your internal talk really does depend on who your mother—or father—was. Were they limiting and tight or flexible and free-spirited?) Sometimes it is best to examine and re-evaluate your "No" before it is said. Internal dialogue can help us avoid power struggles.

"Why shouldn't Roseanna jump up and down when she's happy?"

"Why can't Tommy fill up the sink with water and play with the bubbles?"

"Why does Lee always have to sit down at the dinner table when sometimes he feels like getting up and dancing between bites?"

6. Just Say "Oh" Rather Than "No"

Once again, it does take two to tango. In order for a power struggle to happen, you need to be engaged in the struggle with your child. How about if you don't push back at all, but become a neutral party that offers no resistance. Instead of saying "No" try saying "Oh" or saying nothing at all. Then there is a power struggle waiting to happen that doesn't happen. Continue to let your child talk and you continue to listen.

Child: *"I don't want to eat dinner."*

Parent: *"Oh."*

Child: *"No, no, no, I won't come to the table."*

Parent: *"Oh."*

Child: (after a minute or so of silence) *"What's for dinner?"*

7. Grant a Wish in Fantasy

This concept is offered by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish in their helpful parenting book *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk*. Your child is no different from most adults in that your child wishes to be deeply heard and understood. Sometimes hearing and understanding is enough for your young child and then, when your child feels emotionally partnered, they can move away from the power struggle.

When my young son was in the car and got thirsty he would whine and fuss to stop at a store to get him a drink. After a while I developed this technique: *"I hear you are thirsty. I am thirsty, too. Wouldn't it be great if I had a soda fountain with drink handles on the dashboard of the car? I could then pull one down like this—and get you a drink. What drink would you like? If you had another choice, what would be coming out of the next pull-down handle?"* Partnering with him in his wish and creating a fantasy from that helped avoid any power struggle and changed the negative energy to positive energy.

8. Use Creative Distraction

A child's imagination is a powerful force. *"Engage a child's cooperation by engaging their imagination"* say Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish in their *How to Talk....* book. You can use this technique in two ways: by appealing to your child's interests and also by addressing your child's competitive nature. *"I wonder"* is a powerful phrase that captures the imagination, doesn't require your child's verbal response, and often deflects an upcoming power struggle.

"Jenny, I wonder how a ballerina would dance out to the car."

"Kai, I wonder how a hungry T-Rex coming to the dinner table would look and sound. Just how loud would those stomps and roars be?"

"So, Isabelle, who could be the Queen of the Fastest Dressers—you or me. Let's go..."

9. Use Props

HOURLASS TIMERS/TIMERS

Hourglass sand timers are great props because the sand can be a visual diversion or distraction to help avoid a power struggle. When your child is having trouble waiting and wants something "Now!" offer a sand timer. This gives your child something to have, hold, and watch while they are waiting. Having clean-up struggles? Do a Clean-up Blitz with a kitchen timer. Set the timer for 10 minutes at home on a Sunday evening or before dinner. Maybe play some very fast music. Working double-time, straighten up like crazy for ten minutes, then stop immediately when the timer sounds. What doesn't get done doesn't get done.

PUPPETS

Puppets capture the imagination. Most children respond to puppets, to puppet conversation, and to puppet requests. The puppets can be store-bought, an old sock, or even your bare hand moving like a mouth (with or without magic marker eyes).

When I taught 3 year olds, I had Bunny the Clean-up Puppet. Bunny would whisper in a child's ear, *"Please put either the big block or the little block on the shelf and come back for a bunny hug."* In many years of teaching, there was never one child who didn't follow Bunny's requests and every child always came back for a hug.

Puppets can provide the distance between you and your child necessary to avoid power struggles.

"Listen to Dragon puppet. He's saying, 'Time to brush your teeth.' Do you want to brush his teeth after you've finished with your teeth?"

11. Use Music

Music and songs can be powerful tools in motivating your child to cooperate and to avoid power struggles. When you speak, your words are processed on the opposite side of your brain than your actions. However, when your child hears music, it is processed on the same side of the brain as where actions are processed, so there is a more immediate action response to music than to words.

The easiest songs are piggyback songs where you take a familiar tune, such as The Alphabet Song or Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star (same tune!) and put your words or your child's words to the music.

Many years ago, when I first started teaching preschool, I swore that I was not going to be one of those dorky preschool teachers that sang songs throughout the day. Within three weeks I was one of those dorky teachers because singing at clean-up time, coming

to-snack-time, and getting-on-coat time spurred fifteen young children to action in a way that words never could!

If your child is having a hard time sharing blocks with their brother, you might try singing a *"Building a Fort Song"* to encourage cooperation and ease the sharing process.

If you are having a hard time getting your child's attention you might start clapping a certain rhythm and that should get your child's attention to start clapping the same rhythm.

SONGS AND MUSIC FOR TRANSITIONS

Most young children struggle with transitions; power struggles often occur when your child has to move from one activity to another. Since your young child probably enjoys structure, singing the same song for the same daily transition can help ease the power struggles inherent in getting dressed, brushing teeth, putting on a coat, going up or down stairs, cleaning-up toys, coming to meals, cleaning up from meals, and going to a bath or bed.

You can do a Morning March to the car with high-stepping feet with each of you making the sound of an instrument.

You can play the same breakfast music every day when you prepare and eat breakfast so that this can add structure and avoid power struggles at the start of the day.

During a baking project you can sing *"Have You Seen the Muffin Man?"* as *"Have You Seen Darian Stirring the Dough?"* to structure the length of mixing time and avoid a power struggle around stopping stirring.

You and your child can create a Toothbrushing Song that lasts the two minutes it takes to brush teeth (You will have to sing the song and perhaps your child can make sounds or dance as they brush their teeth.)

Your child can wash their hands for the length of time that it takes to sing Happy Birthday.

SUMMARY

Power Struggles: 10 Ways to Keep Things Cool! explores 10 ways to effectively deal with power struggles with your young child. Four ways are suggested to minimize power struggles before they occur: giving choices, picking and choosing your battles, spending time together, and reading selected books. Six tips are offered to deal with power struggles in the heat of the moment: asking "Why Not?" rather than "Why," saying "Oh" rather than "No," granting a wish in fantasy, and using creative distraction, props, and music. These 10 tips can help you avoid power struggles and promote cooperation in your child.