

# Understanding Power Struggles: The Teenage Years

On the surface power struggles look like a tug of war. The trouble is that if you win by simply out muscling your child, you still feel lousy. There's little pleasure in victory when your child is left distressed and angry. If you lose, it's even worse. What kind of a parent can't even get a child to brush her teeth or finish her homework? Power struggles are frustrating. You don't have all day to negotiate. You just want to get out the door! And power struggles make you angry. Aren't you supposed to be the parent in charge? Power struggles can leave you feelings cared and helpless. And power struggles can make you sad. Screaming at your kids wasn't part of your dream.

## **POWER STRUGGLES ARE ABOUT FEELINGS AND NEEDS ... YOURS AND YOUR CHILDS.**

Recognizing those emotions is the key to stopping power struggles before they ever start. Your child is not "out to get you." Every challenging behavior is fueled by a feeling or need. You can discover that feeling or need and help your child address it respectfully. Listening to your child does not mean spoiling her. Working with your child doesn't mean giving in. You are modeling the kind of respectful interaction you want your child to have with you and others.



Teenagers argue with their parents to get their way, of course, but also to avoid having to resolve their own conflicts over obedience and guilt, pleasure and virtue, self-indulgence and self-denial. Children cling to battles with their parents as a way to avoid letting go of their childish selves. They manage this by becoming experts at baiting their parents into prolonged and repetitive arguments.

The point of teenage rebellion isn't to reject what your parents tell you to do; it is to reject that they tell you what to do. Adolescent rebellion isn't a rejection of parents; it's a rejection of dependence on them.

Learning to express strong emotions, like anger and frustration, respectfully and selectively is learned behavior. You don't have to be a victim of your emotions. You can choose your response. You don't have to react. And as you make those choices, your children are watching and listening. You are their role model, teaching them with your words and actions what adults do when faced with a rush of powerful emotions.

### **Four basic ingredients to manage those strong feelings:**

1. **Change the frame:** If we instead change the frame and see that his behavior is an attempt to do the right thing (but he doesn't know how) or that he has a reason for his actions (he

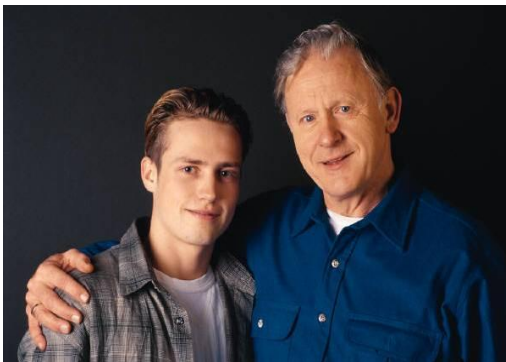
isn't just trying to irritate us), then our intensity will diminish. We are willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and try to resolve the conflict.

**2. Setting standards:** What words and actions are you going to stop yourself from saying or doing even when the stress hormones are pounding through your head? Clarifying your standards is the key to managing stress hormones.

**3. Monitoring your feelings:** It's important to know that anger is often a second emotion. Before it, you've usually experienced a "first feeling," such as frustration, disappointment, fear, or sadness. Look past your anger and ask yourself, What was my first feeling? What's really fueling my reaction? When you recognize your emotion, you can choose your response.

**4. Learning Effective Strategies:** The most effective strategy you can use is a simple pause! Taking one second to breathe deeply or count to ten gives your brain time to shift from "fight or flight" into the neocortex, or thinking brain.

**-Take a break:** If you've gone too far without catching your emotions, a pause may not be enough for you to regain your composure. Make sure you reassure that you'll be back, so



the child knows you are staying connected and simply taking a break to calm yourself.

**-When your child won't let you step away:**

Sometimes children who have experienced a significant loss or separation such as divorce, a major move, death, or foster care find a parent stepping away terrifying. They feel abandoned and try everything to keep the parent with them. If this is your child, it's important to understand her vulnerability, to explain that you are not

abandoning her. You will come back. You are simply calming down. It may be necessary to find someone who can support your child while you cool off.

**-Ask for help:** Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; learning to recognize our limits is a very important skill to teach our children.

**-Make a plan:** The key to all of these strategies is talking about them with the other members of your family. The middle of a blowup is not a teachable time, but later, when everyone is calm, you can go back and say, "Next time let's agree that we can say, "I need a break or a hug" or "Let's make a plan together about our morning, bedtime, or homework routine." Make sure everyone is listened to and has input into the final decision. Children feel valued and empowered when their opinions are taken seriously and are much more likely to follow through with the agreement if they were allowed to contribute.

*By Tracy Krebs, BA, Masters Level Intern*

Resources:

Kurcinka, Mary S. (2000). *Kids, Parents, and Power Struggles*. Quill Publishing: New York.

Nichols, Michael. PhD. (2004). *Stop arguing with your kids: How to win the battle of wills by making your children feel heard*. The Guilford Press: New York.