

13 Ways to Conquer Preschool Power Struggles

by Lisa Medoff

Power struggles are a common occurrence during the preschool years. Although they can be difficult to deal with, be aware that young children who attempt to engage in power struggles are actually developing at an age-appropriate level: they are learning that they have their own thoughts, feelings, and desires and that those are sometimes different than adults.

This is an important cognitive leap with behavioral changes that will soon become apparent to a preschool parent. Although being assertive is a skill that you want your child to have, young children need to be able to practice this skill, while at the same time learning that the rules of adults exist for good reasons, and that those rules must be followed.

While their behavior may be frustrating to you, keep in mind that young children are constantly exploring their world in order to learn and develop. Testing your limits is one way that they explore their environment. So make sure that you establish firm limits for them as early as possible, and stick to those limits. The earlier that children learn that you are not going to give in, the fewer power struggles you will encounter, not only during the preschool years, but throughout childhood and adolescence.

The best way to deal with power struggles is to avoid them by managing your child's schedule and environment, as well as establishing a positive, caring relationship with your child in which your authority is taken seriously. To do both effectively, it's important to have clear, simple rules, and to be consistent in following them.

There are some ideas for avoiding power struggles and for dealing with them if they do occur:

1. Be clear and concise about what you want and what will happen if your child does or does not do what you want. For example, you can say, "I'll read you a story after you put your pajamas on." Always follow through with the consequences that you have told your child about, no matter how much whining or crying ensues. If you can hold firm the first few times you are trying to establish a pattern of behavior, your child will soon learn that you are not going to give in, so it is no use trying to get you to do so.
2. Do not get caught up in a loop of arguing or explaining. If you are trying to get your child to stop playing and come home, and she refuses, then you will just have to pick her up and put her in the car, no matter how much she cries, or how embarrassed you may feel in front of other parents. Remember, your goal is to teach your child, not to look like the perfect parent in front of others.
3. Do not make threats, especially those that you will not follow through on, such as, "If you do not come right now, I am going to leave you at the park." Making threats can prevent you from developing a trusting, positive relationship with your child, as well as teaching him that you are not really serious about enforcing consequences.
4. Follow a routine as consistently as possible. If you stick to a routine, children know what to expect and what is expected of them, which cuts down on arguments. Give lots of warnings that transitions are coming up, such as a five-minute and one-minute warning that it will be time to stop playing and get ready for bed.
5. Avoid situations that lead to power struggles. For example, if it's difficult to get your child to turn off the television and get dressed in the morning, make a rule that the television is not to be turned on until your child is dressed and ready to go to school. Even better, do not allow television in the morning!
6. Do not try to get your child to do something that he usually does not like to do when he is hungry, tired, or anxious.

7. No matter how hard it is, try to remain calm and keep a kind tone in your voice. When you get upset or lose control, you are showing your child that he has power over you – if he can't get you to give him what he wants, at least he can make you as upset as he is.
8. Acknowledge your child's feelings and then ask for help. Say, "I know you're upset about having to leave the park, but I really need your help so that I can get home in time to cook us a nice dinner." Model helping behavior for your child as much as you can, especially during a potential power struggle. Tell your child that you will help her with the task that she does not want to do, or at least get her started.
9. Give your child a limited choice, which will make her feel as if she is getting her way, but giving the choice itself implies that the task must be done. For example, you can say, "Do you want to wear the pink shirt or the purple shirt?" or "Do you want to put away the puzzle first or the stuffed animals?" Choices help children learn decision-making skills and give them a sense of control over their lives. Just make sure that you can live with either of the choices that you offer your child. Do not offer a choice and then push your child towards the option you prefer.
10. Use a situation that could potentially become a power struggle as a learning opportunity for your child. Instead of lecturing or demanding when you see a power struggle brewing, ask questions, such as, "How do you think your stomach will feel if you don't eat breakfast?" or "What do you think we will miss if we can't get dressed in time and end up being late to school?"
11. Try to distract young children by making the activity fun. Sing songs or make the chore into a game.
12. If you find yourself in the middle of a power struggle, try to remove yourself from the situation. Make sure your child is physically safe, and then let her know that you are going to leave her alone until she complies with what you are asking her.
13. Make sure that you have realistic expectations for your child. If you are constantly engaged in power struggles over the same issue, think about whether you are asking too much of your child. Ask your pediatrician or preschool teacher if your child should be able to do what you are asking at this age.

Although you do want to establish a pattern of your child respecting your parental authority, you do not always have to "win" a power struggle. If you find yourself embroiled in a power struggle, think about why you want the outcome that you do. If it is a matter of your child's safety, then do not back down. However, it is important (for both your sanity and your relationship with your child) to compromise once in a while, especially on issues that do not pertain to your child's health and safety, such as if she wants to wear clothing that is dirty or does not match. If you are usually consistent in terms of sticking to your limits and consequences, it can be okay to back down once in a while if you find yourself in the midst of a particularly difficult or frustrating power struggle.