What causes power struggles...and how can we avoid them?

As promised, here is your free report on identifying some of the elements that create those tiring power struggles--along with ideas on how you can avoid them!

The moment our child is born, a host of changes are set in motion that will change our lives forever. Most of them are extraordinary; as we hold our baby, we're filled with awe at the miracle of life and joy, anticipating the incredible journey ahead.

But when we become a parent, we are also signing up for the fact that for at least eighteen years, we will be doing countless things we'd rather not do, for a child who may not always be very grateful for our efforts. Whether it's preparing meals that may not be eaten, helping a disinterested child learn her spelling words, or chauffeuring kids to their various activities, parenting sometimes feels like a thankless and exhausting job.

Sure, we love our kids and would do anything for them. But we're also human, and there are times when we simply reach the end of our rope. Losing our cool is normal; it happens to the best of us. Getting angry doesn't mean you're not a good parent. But if it happens a lot, it is an indication that we may need to consider adding new strategies to our parenting toolbox.

Kids are wired to resist being bossed around. If you're a parent, this comes as no surprise. Most of us are all too familiar with “Do I have to?”, “I don't want to!” and “I'll do it later.” As frustrating as it is to deal with a defiant child, Mother Nature knew what she was doing when she designed children with the instinct to resist. Without it, they would be vulnerable to strangers who might not have their best interests at heart. But parents get tired of engaging in power struggles when it's time for kids to start their homework or take out the trash. We'd like them to just say, “Sure”, without drama and negotiations.

Several factors fuel a child's power struggles. Consider which of the following issues may be contributing to your child's resistance, and read on to make changes that will address the problem at its root.
• **Underlying cause: Child needs to move through frustration:**

Children experience frustration many times a day. They are either told to do things they don’t want to do, or forbidden from doing what they wish they could. From having to climb out of a warm bed in the morning to go to school to being forced to turn off the TV to do their homework, kids are pushed and pulled from one task to the next, often dragging their feet or melting down in an attempt to have things their way.

Frustration only has two possible outcomes: Adaptation or Aggression. When a child is unable to feel her sad feelings, she stays angry and upset, using resistance, negotiations and arguing to try to avoid feeling her disappointment.

**The fix:**

If frustration is at the root cause of your child's power struggles, it is because he needs to feel sad. Most parents jump through hoops to keep their kids happy or to make sure they like them. But the truth is, the solution to a child who is constantly frustrated is not to make sure he gets what he wants.

In fact, giving in to a child whose frustration fuels his power struggles is not the answer. Instead, we need to help our child feel his disappointment and sadness. It may sound unkind, but if a child doesn't develop the capacity to endure life's frustrations, he or she grows up having greater difficulty adjusting to the inevitable ups and downs of day to day living.

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• **Underlying cause: Child needs more freedom:**

Children are born utterly dependent on their caregivers to fulfill their needs. But they also come equipped with a powerful imperative to gradually become their own person. There is no easy way to determine when a child is ready for more autonomy and independence, but children will let us know—often through persistent misbehavior—that they are ready for a longer leash and more responsibility.

A child who is demonstrating the need for more freedom will often say things like, “You always treat me like a baby!”, “You don't trust me!” or “You're not the boss of me!” Sometimes her requests are unreasonable, but at other times, they are entirely legitimate. While we may not be ready for our nine year old to cross the street without holding our hand, or for our fourteen year old to be able to have a later bedtime on the weekend, we have to be fair and recognize that our children do need to grow up, and will rebel if they are too smothered or coddled.
The fix:

Never do something for your child that she can do for herself. The more she feels empowered, the less she'll act out because she feels powerless or suffocated by over-parenting. Put your child in charge of something to help her develop responsibility—whether it's feeding the goldfish, sweeping the patio or writing out the grocery list.

If she is complaining about wanting more privileges, help her prove that she is trustworthy and old enough by letting her take baby steps toward more autonomy. Children who earn more freedoms value them more than those whose parents are so afraid of upsetting them that they cave in and let her do things that are inappropriate, like having a sleepover at a home where the parents are away, or staying up till one in the morning on her laptop because “everyone else does it.”

Help your child learn that she can show you—through how she conducts herself—that she's ready for more independence.

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• Underlying cause: Child needs more connection:

Think about the last time your child was cooperative. Chances are, the two of you were feeling close and connected, and your youngster felt “full” of your love and the security of your attachment.

When our child is disconnected from us, she may not let us know directly. In fact, she may act as though she wants to be around us less, not more. “Honey, do you want to come with me to walk the dog?” may be met with rolled eyes, or “I'm busy!” But the truth is, our kids want and need to feel close to us. But we need to approach them in a way that feels inviting, rather than forced.

The fix:

Surprise your child with an invitation to spend a few minutes with you baking a cake or playing checkers-- without him having whined and pleaded for your time. When children feel that we like them, and that we like being around them, it makes it much more likely that they'll be open to our requests and our direction.

If your child makes it seem as though he has no interest in being in your presence, don't take it personally. Avoid trying to force him to spend time with you. Take baby steps, offering a smile, a quick back rub, or a request to teach you how to do something he's good at doing, whether it's downloading a song or drawing a pony. When your child begins to feel you genuinely like being close and connected, he'll let down his guard, and let you in.

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• **Underlying cause: Need to be seen**

One of the most basic needs of a human being is to be seen, and to feel that we matter. Nothing nourishes a child quite like having someone they love and respect acknowledge something about them that is uniquely theirs. When a child doesn't feel seen, he will often make himself “visible” by acting out and misbehaving. If your youngster is constantly seeking attention—positive or negative—it may be a result of their desire to be noticed, and to feel they matter to you.

In the hustle and bustle of day to day life, it’s easy to get “lost to the list” and focus on the endless tasks of life. Children who feel shortchanged on attention will often be highly uncooperative and resistant. They may rebel, throw tantrums, or if— they feel there’s no hope of truly being seen by you— they may simply pull away entirely and withdraw into their own world, or a world filled with focus on real or cyber “friends.”

**The fix:**

Let your child know that you “get” who they are, and specifically how they light up your life. “I love listening to you tell a story, honey—you have an incredible way of making the characters come to life!” Or, “When I walk in the door after a long day and see you there on the couch, snuggled up with the dog, my heart feels so happy.”

A child who feels valued and important simply because he exists—and not because of their grades, accomplishments or even their good behavior—will naturally lean toward being more connected and cooperative.

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I can help you learn how to come alongside, rather than at your child to promote cooperation and connection, and make daily power struggles a thing of the past. The good news is, it's easy! But it does take changing some habitual ways of interacting that, at first, may not seem as familiar as that instinctive, “Because I told you to!”

I hope you’ll stay in touch, and that you’ll sign up for my newsletter on the homepage of www.SusanStiffelman.com. You may also want to consider my Parenting Without Power Struggles Online Training to learn how to apply the strategies I've developed to your real life challenges. And please head over to our Facebook page where I post ideas and tips nearly every day.

Again, thank you for signing up, and taking steps to learn and grow as a parent. I’m so glad you’re here!

With my best,

Susan Stiffelman