



Saying ‘No!’ to Your Kids (Without a Power Struggle)

Kids naturally push boundaries—it’s normal and part of their growth, though it can be challenging. But do we want to avoid power struggles? These struggles are crucial for their development and independence. As parents, we hold power during the first 12 years, often using it to punish unwanted behaviour and reward good behaviour, a strategy known as external contingencies. Ideally, we want our kids to respect boundaries even when we’re not present. However, relying on punishments and rewards fosters obedience only when we’re watching. True limits need to come from within the children, not from our external control.

Here are five ways to change the power balance in your relationships with your children and get the limits inside them:

Solution 1: Be an example

Children who grow up in homes where parents have good discipline and good habits will generally follow their parents’ examples. Parents who speak softly often have soft-spoken children. Parents who are fit and healthy generally have healthy, fit children.

Solution 2: Invite challenges

This might sound unusual, but it’s powerful. For example, when your teenager asks to host a party with alcohol, tell her you’re fine with it if she can prove it’s reasonable. As she gathers evidence to convince you, she’ll realise the flaws in her request. Though she may not like it, she will internalise your values without your having to argue. (These conversations are draining and can continue for a week or two, but they are powerful for having our teens internalise our values).

Solution 3: Say yes, but in ways that you feel good about

Let’s flip around the previous scenario a little bit. Your teenage son wants to attend a party where you know alcohol will be present. It’s not a small gathering but a large party with limited supervision and widespread social media invitations. You don’t want him to

miss out and feel isolated from his peers, and you generally trust him and his friends. In this situation, have a conversation about expectations. Say that he can attend if you pick him up at an agreed-upon time. This way, he enjoys the party, and you ensure his safety and accountability. The key is to allow him to do what he wants in a way that makes you comfortable. If you're not comfortable, keep negotiating until you are. This approach fosters trust and responsibility while ensuring his safety.

Solution 4: Don't make it about power

This might be the toughest and most 'advanced' approach to handling power struggles. The more you use your power to force an issue, the more you escalate the situation. Teenagers, striving for independence and forming their own identities, naturally resist authority. When you enforce threats, punishments, or rewards, they feel compelled to push back.

How can you avoid making it about power? Tell them you trust their ability to make good decisions and want them to grow responsibly. Defer the situation to them, but request a discussion. Instead of rejecting their choices, ask them to explain their decisions. Probing questions, combined with logic, patience, and love, remove the power dynamic, fostering adult conversations about decision-making and limits.

Solution 5: Choose your battles

Some power struggles are worth the fight. Teenagers should not be drinking, using drugs, viewing pornography, or breaking laws. Depending on their age and the situation, saying 'no' might be necessary. However, even in these cases, minimising the emphasis on power and using reason and logic yields better results by fostering internalisation rather than compliance. There is great irony in our use of power. The more we have to show we have the power to shore up our position, the less power we really have. When our teens are pushing us and we use our power to defend our position, we actually lose power to them.

We have the most power when we don't have to use it, but instead encourage and empower our children to make decisions for themselves.



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