

AVOIDING POWER STRUGGLES

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After throwing away meat wrappers, Suzy asks her son David to take out the trash before she leaves the room to make a phone call. When Suzy comes back, she finds that David has gone outside to play with his friends instead of taking out the trash. The wrappers are torn apart and the trash has been spread out all over the kitchen floor by the family dog. Suzy is furious! Since David is not around, Suzy cleans up the mess by herself. She decides that she needs to punish David for not following her directions and causing the mess. She goes into David's bedroom, gathers up all his video games, and hides them in her closet. When David gets home, he finds his games missing. He confronts Suzy, yelling at her and calling her stupid.

The next day, Suzy asks David to take out the trash again. This time, David takes his time doing other things like brushing his teeth, getting dressed, and watching a little television. Suzy reminds him repeatedly, her voice getting louder and louder. She follows him around the house until finally, David takes the trash out. Suzy is proud of making David follow-through (although he did not put the top back on the trash can), but is also frustrated because she didn't get to other things that she wanted to do that morning; the sink is full of dishes and there is still laundry to be folded. She reluctantly gives David his video games back. David decides to hide two of his video games under his mattress in case his mom tries to take them away again.



On the third day, Suzy asks David to take out the trash again. David says he will do it when he is finished with his breakfast, but heads to bathroom instead. Suzy charges into the bathroom, demanding that David take out the trash first. He rolls his eyes at her, but does not move toward the kitchen. Suzy tells herself that David is getting “out of control”. She threatens to take his video games again. (David doesn't care because he had hidden his favorite two games). Suzy pushes past David, marches into David's bedroom and removes all of the electronics equipment. David tells his mother that he hates her and that she is a thief. He leaves the house and she takes out the trash.

Coercive Process: Power Struggles

The back-and forth power struggle in which Suzy and David are embroiled has been referred to as the “coercive family process” (Patterson, 2002). In these situations, parents and children react to one another, upping the ante until problems get much worse or someone finally gives in.

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“Negative behavior and interactions lead to negative thoughts and assumptions, which lead to additional problems in the future.”

In Suzy and David’s case, Suzy resorts to more severe consequences until David agrees to, and sometimes actually follows through, with taking out the trash. Sometimes Suzy “wins”; that is, when she gets David to comply or is able to follow through with restricting video games. Sometimes David “wins” because he delays or avoids the task required. Both participants also lose in these battles. Suzy finds that she is expending effort and time to address problems with David that would be better used elsewhere and David loses his games.

In coercive processes, both parents and children are trying to control the situation and frustrated. Frequent coercive interactions can come to define how parents and children communicate with one another, as well as their relationships in general. Oftentimes, what begins as a small problem escalates and generalizes way beyond the original problem (i.e., taking out the trash). Negative behavior and interactions lead to negative thoughts and assumptions, which lead to additional problems in the future. Parents and children may come to expect unpleasant communication and therefore avoid one another or find themselves continually stressed. Over time, there is a breakdown in trust and serious damage to the relationship.



Avoiding Coercion and Improving Interactions

There are a variety of strategies that can avoid or minimize these power struggles (Barkley & Benton, 1998). Here is a summary:

Choose the right time and place. Make sure your child has time to complete what you are asking of him and that the environment is right. For example, it is better to ask children to complete chores before they start an enjoyable activity, but after their personal needs are met. Also, have everything they need (e.g., trash bags) handy.

Be specific about your expectations. Define exactly what you would like your child to do. For example, you might show him how to draw the top of the trash bag together, where the bags are, and how tight the lid must be fastened. It is sometimes helpful to write down expectations to provide a reminder.

Make sure children can do what they are asked. Before leaving a child to do a task independently, check to see if they are capable of completing it independently. For example, it may be difficult for a child to manage trash that is overflowing.

Encourage follow through without nagging. Remain nearby and at least partially available until the task is completed. If it is necessary to remind the child, try using hints or gestures such as pointing to the trash or chore list and explain any consequences that may follow (see below).

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Focus on rewards, rather than punishment. Consider how completing tasks will be rewarded. For example, Suzy might list any chores David needs to complete and let him know that he can have his video games, time with friends, or allowance only after they are completed. Make sure to praise!

Catch yourself if the emotions are building. When you find yourself in middle of a power struggle that is escalating, take a break. Simply say, “I am getting frustrated, so we’re going to need to decide what to do about this later”.

Withdraw without feeding into the behavior. Although you may be withdrawing from the conflict, it is not necessary to give in to demands that may have started the hassle or let your child off the hook. For example, Suzy should still withhold video games until his chores have been completed.

Rely on natural consequences, when appropriate. If there are natural consequences that make sense, use them. For example, David may need to miss some time with his friends or video games while he is cleaning up spilled trash.

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Coercive interactions tend to occur when expectations are unclear and families are under stress. Once conflicts have occurred repeatedly, parents and children often come to anticipate and become poised for problems, which can actually precipitate coercive interactions. When there is time, it is important for parents to plan ahead, create a schedule, and communicate with their children. Parents and children also need time to strengthen or rebuild their relationships through purely positive activities.

Barkley, R. A., & Benton, C. (1998). *Your Defiant Child: 8 Steps to Better Behavior*. New York: Guilford.

Patterson, G. R. (2002). The early development of coercive family process. In J. B.Reid, G. R. Patterson, & J. Snyder (Eds), *Antisocial behavior in children and adolescents: A developmental analysis and model for intervention*, (pp. 25–44). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

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