

Avoiding Power Struggles with Your Children

by Kathy Slattengren

It's easy to get into power struggles with your children. However, once you learn what triggers power struggles, you can avoid them. Let's look at how to do this using a couple of examples.

In the first situation, five year old Jacob has asked his mom if he can have a cookie. She's told him that he cannot have a cookie right now since dinner is in 30 minutes. He complained "You never let me have anything I want!"

The responses below will fuel a power struggle because they encourage Jacob to further discuss why he should be allowed to have a cookie.

- "If you have a cookie now, you won't be hungry for your dinner."
- "That's not true. I bought you an ice cream cone yesterday when we were at the store."
- "Cookies really aren't that healthy and you already had two earlier today."



If mom chooses one of these responses instead, she will be avoiding an argument.

- "That's sad."
- "Hmmm"
- "I can see how you might feel that way."

These types of responses can be used in many situations. They work because they acknowledge the child without responding to the content of what the child just said. They don't provide any fuel for an argument.

In the next situation, 15 year old Emily has asked her dad if she can watch an R rated movie. Her dad has explained she needs to be at least 18 years old before he will allow her to watch an R rated movie. Emily complained "That's not fair! All my friends have already seen it."

If dad chooses any of these responses, he's setting himself up for a fight:

- "I'm not being unfair. Children should not be allowed to see R rate movies before they're 18."
- "I doubt all your friends have seen that movie and even if they have, that's no reason for you to see it."

- “If everyone else jumped off a bridge, I suppose you would too!”

Any time you respond by challenging what the child just said, you are encouraging a fight.

Using one of these responses instead will help dad avoid an argument:

- “It’s probably not fair.”
- “Probably so.”
- “Regardless, you won’t be able to watch it.”

By using a non-emotional, neutral response, the child does not have something to grab onto and argue about. The next time you’re in a situation that might lead to a power struggle, try using a neutral response and save yourself energy by not arguing!

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