

Pamela Smith

Toddlers, Tweens and Teens

5 Approaches to reducing power struggles.

Let's begin by acknowledging that you are a good parent with a good kiddo. Sometimes you are just not in a place to be effective because maybe... everyone is hungry and melting down as you're trying to get dinner on the table, or maybe... you're rushing home from an exhausting day and have to cart two kids to different lessons, or maybe your toddler is teething again. You care deeply for your child and want the best for them, but emotions significantly contribute to engaging in a power struggle. It is an emotional battle for who is in control.

Children develop their preferences and identities through many small decisions as they grow. Yet most decisions are left to parents. When we demand cooperation from our children by ordering, correcting, and directing, we evoke a natural fight-or-flight response. From a very early age, children need autonomy which is the ability to act of their own free will or at least have a sense of control. Autonomy is essential to a child's self-esteem, confidence and independence.

In my 25 years of working with parents and raising my own children, the most common power struggles occur when parents try to control

- What goes into a child
- What comes out of a child, both food and words
- What a child is feeling or thinking
- The pace of their movements

The good news is you have complete control over your behaviour.

Small steps make the most significant changes, so try one approach at a time. Check in with yourself and your child/teen to see how you feel after each approach. Notice what's shifted.



G.E.M.s

Genuine Encounter Moments (G.E.M.s) are moments you spend with your child/teen dropping out of your head and staying entirely in your heart. G.E.M.s ensure children's emotional needs are met in brief but focused moments.

- *Pause* what you are doing with the intention of connecting.
 - *Open* your heart and ears and join your child/teen in their world.
 - As children *feel* safe and connected, they become more responsive and less reactive.
- Shift* your physical presence to their level, and give them your uninterrupted attention.



ROUTINES

Let routines be the boss! Routines create many opportunities for independence because children are not relying on an adult to tell them what to do next. Children and teens must contribute to creating new routines and modifying established routines to develop mutual cooperation.



CHOICES

Reduce power struggles by offering a choice instead of a demand. Choices empower children to take responsibility, and children do not learn to take responsibility by following directions. Talk about your child/teen's decision and acknowledge it. It will validate their decision-making ability and build their confidence.

A child learns through everyday decision-making, and decision-making skills can be practiced with choices. There are non-negotiable choices like brushing teeth or doing homework, but how and when it is done can be offered as a choice. Offer meaningful options to both you and your child. If your child does not like most vegetables, offering broccoli or cauliflower is not a choice; therefore, cucumbers and baby carrots may be a palatable choice.

Too many choices for anyone can be overwhelming. Narrow them to 2 offerings. When your child becomes older, the options can become more complex. Some choices can become a ritual, like creating a weekly menu plan. Each person can list their favourite foods, help with grocery shopping and assist with the preparation.



CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT

“Just like flowers, when our little children aren’t “blooming” as expected or conforming to our standards, we tend to believe the child needs fixing, failing to see that every child thrives in the right environment.” -Isabel Stafford, Family Alchemist™.

Children often engage in power struggles when they’re tired, hungry, or overstimulated. Power struggles can also occur during specific developmental stages when the child seeks more independence. Like the two-year-old who wants to do everything themselves, the tween who wants to walk home with friends, or the teen who feels they do not need a curfew. It also happens when they need more control in their environments or have fewer opportunities for active, social play. Children and teens are driven to explore their world in pursuit of independence. Power struggles can occur when a child/teen challenges boundaries — predictability matters, and there is safety for the child in knowing what to expect. They are more likely to think that their world is safe and orderly and they can trust adults. An orderly world helps a child feel secure and free to explore within the appropriate limits and boundaries of maturity. Support your child with a predictable environment that includes their physical space, the timing of things, your requests, instructions and consistent expectations.



EMPOWER

“While children must first learn to trust their parents, parents must also learn to trust their children. This is the key component of the empowering process.” (Balswick & Balswick)

Sometimes fear and doubt can sabotage our efforts to empower our children. To reactivate your faith in them:

- Reflect on times your child has made a sound decision.
- Use previous successes to build their confidence to learn a new skill.
- Give children the power that is appropriate to their age and development.
- Provide a non-judgemental presence for the challenges and struggles that result in natural and logical consequences.

Finally, instead of asking, “how can I make my child..” ask yourself, “how can I support my child to decide to...”

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5 Approaches in Action for Common Power Struggles

Below are examples of 5 different ways to handle each power struggle using the tools I've described above. Remember to try different ones and tune into which approach or combination feels best for you and your child/teen.

Your toddler wants to avoid getting dressed.



G.E.M.s:

Snuggles in the morning help reconnect after night's separation. Toddlers' executive functions are just starting to develop, so they have yet to learn from the passage of time. Some may wake up ready for the day, while others may need a few minutes of meandering in bed.



ROUTINES:

Establish a structured morning routine. It might look like this: 5-minute cuddles/tickles, get dressed, breakfast, brush teeth, playtime, read a book, shoes on to leave. Children feel safer when they know what is coming after what they are currently doing, and it grounds them in a sequence they understand. Connect the sequence of the routine to cues using pictures in a book or on the wall and words like "When you are finished your breakfast, we will read a story," "When we have finished the story, we will be putting on our shoes and coat."



CHOICES:

The night before, pick out two outfits you know your child is comfortable wearing. In the morning, offer the choice of a red shirt or a blue shirt, a pink hoodie or a green hoodie.



CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT:

If possible, prepare for the day before your child wakes up to avoid feeling rushed. If it is an early wake-up time for both of you, organize some of your mornings the night before. Start the morning earlier to allow the time and space for struggles. Now, you can connect with your toddler and let go of the morning rush. Purchase clothing that is easier for the child to dress themselves, like a loose waistband and consider any sensitivities. Have two options of clothing accessible to your toddler. Allow them to mix and match.



EMPOWER:

Begin with small steps to teach your toddler a new skill with something they can do themselves. Ie. Start with holding underwear or bottoms in front of the child, directing them to put their feet into each leg of the bottoms and then encourage them to pull them up. After a few days, encourage your child to put 1 item of clothing on independently, i.e., underwear or socks. Celebrate and say, "Look at you! You chose your socks and put them on yourself. That's independence."

Your tween wants to do something other than their homework.



G.E.M.s:

You and your child need a 'brain break'! Your calm presence and a space of silence without a barrage of questions may be all they need to decompress from the day.



ROUTINES:

Establish a visual homework routine. With input from your tween, establish a time that works best for them and you so that you are available for support. Be open to experimenting with a timeframe. Check-in after two weeks to see if it is working.



CHOICES:

Completing homework may be non-negotiable, but within the routine, allow for options. For example: Do you want to break up your homework into 2-15 minute or 3-10 minute sessions?

Do you want to sit at the table in the kitchen or at the counter? Do you want to start with math first or science? Allow your child to experiment and notice what is working and what is not.

CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT:



Discuss with your tween when and where they want to do their work and create a homework zone and a schedule. Most tweens wish to stay connected to their parents/caregivers and prefer working in a nearby space.

Gather necessary materials in baskets or containers and eliminate distractions, i.e. screens and noise. Other family members should be involved in a quiet activity if they do not have homework, i.e. reading, drawing, or listening to music with headphones.

Together create a large calendar for a visual so the tween can keep track of ongoing assignments and resist the need to remind them.



EMPOWER:

Sometimes tweens want to avoid starting homework because they feel overwhelmed by the amount to do or the frustration of the task. Listen and validate feelings, even those that tell you everything is stupid, so they can feel heard. Offer assistance to boost them past the hurdle preventing them from moving on.

Recall or ask your tween about a time they struggled with homework and what helped them get through it.

Sometimes you must let go and show faith in your child, saying, "I know you can do this, and I believe in you to make your own choices and deal with the consequences."

Your teen is spending too much time on their screens.



G.E.M.s:

Connections always come before expectations about homework or responsibilities. Consciously and consistently make time to be fully present for your teen and connect with something they enjoy outside of screens. However, be curious about what they spend their screen time on and sit beside them without asking questions or joining in the fun, whether a video game or creating social media content.



ROUTINES:

Remember, routines can be the boss. Decide what the non-negotiables are. For example:

For example:

- You may have specific black-out periods during the day and evening whereby no one will use a device: Mealtime, Family time and 1 hour before bedtime.
- You may require specific tasks to be completed before screen time.
- You may develop a weekday routine and a more flexible weekend routine.

Since media habits differ for every household, I've included a resource I find very helpful called the Family Media Plan, which can be customized to meet your family's needs.

[HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan](https://www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan)



EMPOWER:

First, take time to notice how, where, when and why your teen is using a screen. With this information, have an open discussion about your observations. Use this time to give information about your concerns and listen to your teen's point of view.



CONTROL THE ENVIRONMENT:

Create screen-free spaces and times/days. These spaces are designed to create, relax or connect. Be firm and consistent with your expectations of these spaces and times. Have a box or basket to hold everyone's devices. Create opportunities for creative play or games. Placing fun materials within eyesight reminds everyone of other ways to spend our time. Role model putting your phone away.



CHOICES:

After all of the above, allowing your teen to make choices about screen time will enable them to practice managing screen time independently. Remember, you do not want to rescue them when their choices interfere with life, and natural consequences occur.