

# AVOIDING POWER STRUGGLES WITH CHILDREN



Parents and children often struggle for power and control in their relationship. Especially as the child grows older and wants more freedoms, these struggles can grow more intense. No parent likes to fight with their child and no child wants to be defiant. When children defy rules or simple requests, it is an attempt at controlling something in their life. Children can often feel powerless, as many adults make life decisions for them, such as going to school or access to entertainment. While there is no argument in the fact that children must attend school, there is wiggle room on the issue of entertainment. Avoiding power struggles with children is all about picking your battles wisely.

Parents are encouraged to create three “baskets” for their child’s behaviors. One basket holds behaviors that are non-negotiable; these are usually related to safety. For example, a non-negotiable behavior for teens may be, “You cannot be at a party where parents are not present.” Another basket holds behaviors that can be negotiated as your child ages, such as bedtime or curfew. The third basket is for behaviors you can “let go.” These behaviors are less than desirable, but do not need to be a fight every time, for example, the child who repeatedly forgets to hang up their coat. Identifying which behaviors fit into which basket can help parents save time and headaches. Remember, however, that different children may have different baskets. Maybe your son was allowed to stay up until 9 o’clock when he was 10, but his sister cannot get up on time if she stays up that late at the same age.

In his article, “How to Avoid Power Struggles with Defiant Children,” James Lehman, LMSW encourages parents to, “Remember, when you engage in an argument with your child, you’re just giving him more power...So next time your child tries to draw you into a defiant power struggle over something either minor or major, just say, “We’ve discussed what is going to happen. I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” and leave the room. When you leave, you take all the power with you—you just suck it out of the room, and your child is left yelling at a blank wall.”

Children need guidance and structure from their parents, even when they resist or flat out deny it. Lehman suggests that any discussion of a change in the child’s amount of power use the following four questions (used here with the bedtime example):

## **1. How will we know it's working?**

*We'll know staying up later is working if you still get up on time in the morning.*

## **2. How do we know it's not working?**

*If you have a hard time getting up on time and don't have energy during the day.*

### 3. What will we do if it's not working?

*We'll go back to the old time, 8:00 p.m.*

### 4. What will we do if it is working?

*We'll continue with this new bedtime.*

**\*\*\*Do not give a consequence, try again after set amount of time.\*\*\***

Learning how to discuss problems and come to a resolution teaches children problem-solving skills, as well as how to cooperate with others with whom they may not agree. It also shows a parent's willingness to work with them, while maintaining authority. Working with a child to reach a compromise, especially by offering them choices, also teaches them responsibility and how to meet expectations. For example, a teenager who drives cannot have a curfew of 1 am. However, they can have a nightly curfew of 11 pm, or a weeknight curfew of 10 pm with a weekend curfew of midnight. Should they break the new agreement, their curfew goes back to what it was previously.

For younger children, parents are encouraged to create a "Consequence Jar." This is a container of some sort that holds slips of paper with different consequences written on them. A child takes a consequence and completes it any time he is in trouble. The catch here is that the child writes the consequences himself. This way, he knows the consequences are "fair" and cannot blame parents for being mean, because he wrote the consequences himself. Of course, parents should approve the consequences before they go into the jar, so "Eat a bowl of ice cream" does not become a consequence. You can also have the child create a similar "Rewards Jar" for when they have gone the extra mile, reached a goal, or you just want to say, "thank you." Children who receive recognition for being good, even when it's "stuff their supposed to do," are less defiant than children who are only reprimanded for negative behaviors.

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***For more information or a free phone consultation, contact Cana Counseling at Catholic Charities, (316) 263-6941, or visit [CatholicCharitiesWichita.org](http://CatholicCharitiesWichita.org).***

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