

Power Struggles: Why They Happen and What To Do Instead of Digging Your Heels In

By Anisa Lewis – Positive Parenting (www.anisalewis.com)

At some point in every family, a simple request turns into a full blown stand-off.

A toddler throws themselves on the floor because you cut the toast the wrong way.
A primary school child argues about homework like you have personally ruined their future.

A teenager looks at you as if you have asked them to climb Everest when all you said was, “Can you be home by ten?”

Different ages. Same tension. Power struggles.

Here is the truth. Power struggles are not a sign of bad parenting or bad children. They are often a sign of growth.

Children push boundaries because they are wired to develop independence. The friction we feel is usually development doing its job.

In the early years, children are discovering autonomy. They realise they are separate from you. “No” becomes a powerful word because it proves they have a voice. Their brains are still developing emotional regulation, so when they feel frustrated, it comes out physically or loudly. It is not manipulation. It is immaturity.

In the primary years, children are building competence and comparison creeps in. They want to feel capable and respected. When they argue, it is often because they are testing where they stand. They are asking, “Do I have any say here?” Even if it comes out as eye rolling or back chat.

In the teenage years, the job is separation. They are forming identity, opinions, values. Questioning you is part of that process. It can feel personal, but it is often developmental. They are not trying to overthrow the household. They are trying to work out who they are.

Understanding the season does not make the conflict disappear, but it does change how we respond.

Most power struggles escalate for one simple reason. Both sides feel unheard.

When a child feels powerless, they push harder. When a parent feels disrespected, they clamp down tighter. The rope gets pulled from both ends.

So what helps?

First, **slow the moment down**. When emotions rise, logic drops. A regulated adult nervous system is the most powerful tool in the room. Lower your voice. Reduce your words. Create space. You are modelling the very skill you want them to learn.

Second, **separate the behaviour from the need**. The behaviour might be shouting. The need might be autonomy, attention, rest, or reassurance. When we look underneath the surface, our response becomes more thoughtful and less reactive.

Third, **be clear and consistent with boundaries**. Children of all ages feel safer when the edges, the boundaries are predictable. Boundaries do not need to be loud to be firm. A calm, steady “I can see you are upset. The answer is still no” is far more powerful than a lecture.

Fourth, **offer age-appropriate responsibility**. Many power struggles reduce when children feel trusted. A toddler can choose between two options. A primary aged child can help problem solve. A teenager can negotiate curfews within agreed limits. Shared ownership reduces the need to fight for control.

Finally, **remember that connection is not weakness**. It is leadership. A child who feels understood is more likely to cooperate. That does not mean agreeing with the behaviour. It means acknowledging the feeling.

Power struggles are part of family life. They show us that our children are growing, stretching, testing their wings. The goal is not to win. The goal is to guide.

When we move from control to curiosity, from shouting to steadiness, we teach something far bigger than compliance. We teach emotional strength, respect, and resilience. And that is a lesson that lasts far beyond any single battle over toast, homework, or curfew.