

How to stop arguing with your kids

*Learn how to banish your kid's bad behavior
By Beverley Cathcart-Ross*



Mom is buzzing around the kitchen getting Jacob's breakfast ready.

"Hon, you know we have to be dressed before breakfast. Please go back upstairs and get your school clothes on."

Jacob ignores his mom and plays with the cat.

"Jacob, up you go. We are going to be late."

Jacob drags the kitchen stool across the floor to the counter -- SCREECH!

"Jacob will you stop that! You're marking the floor!"

Jacob glares at his mom as he continues to drag the stool. Mom snaps and in the next breath both are engaged in a tug-of-war over the stool and yelling at each other. Sound familiar?

Conflicts are a part of life and especially common among family members. While they may be frustrating (OK, sometimes they are outright infuriating) they actually aren't all bad -- honest. Conflict is an important part of our kids' (and often our own) development. The key is to deal with it in a [respectful](#) and caring manner before it escalates in a power struggle. Here's how.

1. Learn to share

When we use power over kids to manage and direct them or call the shots, we put ourselves in a position of superiority. Your child is then faced with the uncomfortable choice of submitting to your will or resisting his will. It's a no-win situation.

In the case of Jacob, if he submits, he will feel powerless and defeated. On the other hand, he has learned that [defiance makes him feel powerful](#). If these are the only two choices in his mind, it's no wonder why defiance wins out every time. Yet, when you give into the demands of your child and let him call the shots you are giving him all the power.

What's a parent to do? Share power with your kids so that the relationship is based on cooperation. (The exception, of course, is when the child is in a dangerous situation -- then by all means, take charge!) This is easily accomplished by giving your child a role in decision making -- a voice and a say in areas that affect him.

2. Stop managing and directing

When you manage and direct your kids it shows a lack of confidence in them and can make them feel inadequate. This attitude is hurtful. And when our kids are hurt by us, they hurt back. (We all have this powerful primal reflex.) In Jacob's case, he hurt Mom by resisting her directions and then by getting even with a fight. A better approach for Mom is to focus on who she has control over: herself. Tell Jacob what she will do (not what he will do), such as, "I will serve you breakfast as soon as you are ready," or ask a question, such as "How quickly can you be ready for breakfast, Jacob?" With this approach, you are [teaching your child to be responsible](#) and use his own judgment.

3. Give your kids life skills

Your child wants to do well, feel close to others in the family and have some control over himself. Help him find positive power in his life by teaching him the skills of independence, resourcefulness, decision making and problem solving. For example, when a three-year-old is encouraged to choose his own clothes each morning, prepare a sandwich or help with dishes, he is gaining the confidence and experience to prepare himself for more complex tasks and decisions later in life.

Tap into your child's innate desire to learn. Teach an older child to call and arrange his own play dates, book the cat's check-up at the vet and go to the weather channel or listen to the radio to find out the weather so he knows if he needs to take a coat and umbrella to school. Again, you are building on your child's sense of independence and resourcefulness.

4. Talk to yourself

In times of tension it's important to keep your cool, so replace your negative self-talk about your child with more positive thoughts such as:

- I can't force my child. I can only encourage him to work with me.
- This, too, will pass -- just have some faith.
- I'm in charge of how I feel and what I do, not my child.
- I love my son, but I don't love what he is doing at the moment.

5. Give information, ask questions and offer choices

Make statements that give your child information he can use and let him know what he has to do. For example, Jacob's mom could say, "Breakfast is just about ready." Then be quiet; resist the urge to tell him what to do. If nothing happens ask a question or offer a choice, such as "Jacob, what do you need to do before breakfast?" or "How can I help you get ready for breakfast?" This approach will help your child focus on the needs at hand and direct himself. **HINT:** When you present a power-hungry child with a choice, such as "Do you want to get your clothes on upstairs or bring them down here?" he feels good because he is making the decision -- not you! Just don't give choices you aren't willing to follow through on.

6. Let routines be the boss

Ask your child, "What do we do in our house before breakfast?" Be quiet and let him

take the next step. If he keeps resisting the established routine, maybe it's time to hammer out a new one. Why? Routines work best when your child has a say and you are consistent and follow through. That means if you agree to him being dressed before breakfast, and he goofs around, he might miss breakfast. Natural consequences can be wonderful life lessons if we don't give endless warnings or bail out our kids.

7. Show you care

Ask, "Are you having a rough morning?" Then give your child a hug as a way to make amends. Offering closeness when our kids are expecting distance can be powerful. It shows you believe in them and can diffuse the conflict.

8. Let your feet do the talking

Don't go on and on; save your breath, hold out your hand and lead your child calmly upstairs and show him the clothes he needs to put on. If you talk, chat about the weather, not about what he needs to do. Jacob's mom could have moved the stool without comment -- in a kind but firm way. Remember it is just as important how you do something as it is what you do.

9. Ask for help

Kids love to be resourceful, though it may not seem this way. It makes them feel valued and that their ideas are important. Jacob's mom could have asked him, "What do you think we can do about this stool? It's making a mess, isn't it?"

10. Give your child a job

Your child has more time and energy than you do, so why do everything for him? Because it's faster and better? Perhaps. But that's short-term thinking. Instead try to nurture life skills.

11. Tone it down

Your tone speaks volumes. Comments such as "Dragging the stool is scratching the floor," said in an impatient manner will reap the same results as bossing. (Imagine the look you'd get if you spoke to a girlfriend that way.) Use a respectful approach and stay calm.

12. Encourage effort

Acknowledge any effort. Comments such as "We got out of the house on time. Give me five!" (even though breakfast was missed) go a long way.

13. Walk away

OK, you're thinking, These strategies may work on someone else's kid but not on mine! It may take a while to get the results you are looking for so in the meantime, bail out before the boat sinks! After all, we get the results we want when we are calm and not all revved up for a fight.

When Jacob wasn't cooperating and his mom was getting annoyed, she could have left the kitchen without words, or perhaps with this great line: "Jacob, I love you too much to fight. I am going upstairs until we are both calm."

This isn't giving in; it's modeling a respectful approach to dealing with conflict. **BONUS:** You'll be teaching your kids about respect for one's self and for others.

14. Start fresh

Jacob and Mom need to find a calm time to discuss ways to make tomorrow a better day. Talk about your child's feelings first and then your feelings (keeping it to 10 words or less -- you don't want to lose him!). Then brainstorm for solutions together. Put one to the test for a few days. View it as a process that will require patience and likely some fine-tuning!

Beverley Cathcart-Ross is a certified parent educator and founder of the [Parenting Network](#).

Avoid power struggles with your child



Anatomy of a power struggle

WHAT IS IT? A power struggle typically happens when two people don't agree on something and neither one is willing to step down. Power struggles with children can show up as early as six to nine months of age. (Ever tried to put a diaper on a squirming infant when she has other things on her mind?)

ACTIVE POWER. By the age of three to five years old our kids have developed new weaponry to do battle with us: now they have [language](#) on their side. This is when defiant remarks such as "You're not the boss of me" make their debut. Now we have an active power struggle on our hands, and it includes drama specials such as arguing, making demands and [temper tantrums](#) -- sometimes performed in large public venues, such as your local [grocery store](#).

PASSIVE POWER. Struggles in your home may be more passive, but just as provoking. These involve resistance in less obvious ways, the most common being dawdling. ("Oops, I just need one more thing from my room," says Amy as she darts up the stairs, leaving other family members simmering in their winter coats at the front door.) Stubborn and forgetful behavior also falls into this category, and without realizing it, we may end up giving in and over serving our kids.

QUICK FIXES. Look at the "hot spots" in your day. These are the times when you are most pressured and get more easily unglued: mornings, mealtimes, homework time and bedtime.

These times become even more pressured when you need to have certain "standards" met -- that list of things your child must do and not do. If power struggles are a problem in your home, pick one of these hot spots and reflect on how you can smooth out the process.

Telltale signs that a power struggle is heading your way:

1. Self-talk or thoughts that fuel you.

Examples:

"You aren't going to get away with it this time!"

"Why can't you just listen for a change?!"

"That's it. I've had it!"

2. Self-talk that fuels your child.

Examples:

"You can't make me."

"Why do you always get to decide?"

3. Both of you are feeling angry, provoked, challenged or a sense of powerlessness and defeat.

- What YOU can do -- typical reactions to avoid:

Warnings: "Touch that once more young lady...."

Demands: "I don't care if you are watching TV -- turn it off now!"

Threats: "If you don't come down right now, there will be no dinner for you."

Controlling: "No, you can't go for a sleepover tonight. You need your rest."

Criticizing: "What is the matter with you. Can't you remember even the simplest thing?"

Directing: "Hurry up, will you? We are going to be late for school again."

Managing: "I need you to brush your teeth, wash your face and get into your pajamas.

Then it is story time."

Punishing: "You stay in your room until I tell you to come out."

Giving in: "Do what you want. I'm tired of fighting with you."

- Typical child reactions to watch out for:

Provoking behavior escalates.

Your child looks you in the eye and continues to provoke you.

He argues, ignores you or withdraws.

He gives lip service ("Yeah, I'll get on it.") but does not follow through.

Taming Teen Power Struggles:

Power struggles with teens may seem more complicated (and a whole lot louder!) than with young kids, but they are fuelled by the same thing: your child feels that you are trying to control her, says Karyn Gordon, who counsels teens and has a doctorate in family therapy.

“The purpose of adolescence, in terms of emotional development and maturity is for kids to start becoming more independent,” says Gordon. That means you need to accept that your little darling is growing up (sniff), rightfully questioning authority and rules, and needs to make more decisions for herself. So take a deep breath when your teen challenges you at every turn and decide where you can let go. “Giving her a little more rope starts to change the relationship,” says Gordon. And if you don’t feel threatened by her questions, they will become part of a normal dialogue and not an ongoing conflict.”

If we are too rigid, Gordon says out teens will do one of two things: “be compliant but be resentful, perhaps stewing in silence or start to question absolutely everything and rebel.”

Hearing your teen out makes her feel she is respected; it doesn’t mean you have to go along with everything she suggests. Do try to strike compromises though. The negotiating process will strengthen your bond and give you both valuable life skills.

--Carlye Malchuk

