



Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

Navigating Power Struggles

Do you have a child who often says “no” to everything? Does it become a back-and-forth battle that erupts into a tantrum? If so, you are experiencing a **power struggle**, a competition for power where both the child and adult are trying to assert their authority or control. All children want and need a sense of control, which is normal and developmentally appropriate. Experts from the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations tell us that there is always a reason behind a child’s behavior. They may be feeling insecure, or lack the skills needed to communicate their feelings and needs. Understanding this and remembering that your child is not misbehaving on purpose can help to reframe your thoughts, thus helping you to respond in a calm way. On the other hand, yelling or shaming a child will escalate a child’s aggression and lead to increased misbehavior.

The key to decreasing power struggles is by first managing our own emotions. Try the following for a positive mindset:

- ♥ Remove yourself from the power struggle by saying, “I need a minute to feel calm again. I’m going to take a few deep breaths.”
- ♥ Practice reframing statements. Instead of, “*Kayla is so naughty!*” think about the possible reason behind the behavior, e.g., “*Kayla may need some help using her words to ask for a turn.*”

Power struggles happen when a child feels that they have no control or power and that an adult holds all the power. In their eyes, the adult makes the rules, sets the schedule, decides what food to eat, when to wake up, take a bath, or go to sleep. While these rules and structure are important and necessary, the following strategies can help maintain the child’s sense of



control without compromising important rules and routines:

- ♥ Using visual supports
- ♥ Providing two GREAT choices
- ♥ Diffusing a power struggle with empathy

This newsletter will share helpful strategies for navigating power struggles with infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

This newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child’s development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Resources:** for more information, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.

Infants

When you build a healthy attachment with your baby, you are building trust, coping skills, connections in his brain, and much more! Although you may not see power struggles beginning in infancy, you can do things to build a secure attachment with your child that will help build his emotional regulation skills.

Try the following strategies to build a strong attachment with your infant:

- ♥ **Take care of yourself:** As challenging as it may be, it is important to take care of yourself in order to bond with your child. Try to nap when your child naps. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and find ways to destress (e.g., taking deep breaths, a walk outside, or a hot shower).
- ♥ **Notice infant's unique cues:** Find out what your child is trying to tell you by watching his body language and listening for the different sounds he makes. Contrary to the myth that responding to a baby means spoiling them, the more responsive you are, the more your child will trust that you will be there for him.
- ♥ **Serve and return:** Your back-and-forth interactions help to build attachment and



trust. When your child coos or gurgles (serve), you might respond by copying his sounds and actions (return).

Activity for Infants: *Connecting During Feedings*

What You Need:

- Your normal feeding supplies
- Comfortable seating

What to Do:

1. Whether you are breastfeeding or bottle feeding, hold and cuddle your infant. Skin-to-skin contact helps infant connect with you.
2. Make eye contact and notice his cues (e.g., back arching, hand sucking, crying).
3. Respond to his cues (e.g., "Yes, I'm getting your bottle ready.")
4. Offer him the nipple and watch his cues and respond when he signals that he is done (e.g., turning away, closing his mouth).



(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)

Toddlers

By 18 months, children understand that they are separate from their caregiver and their actions can cause an effect. This emerging self-awareness is a normal part of development and along with this comes a need for a sense of control.

You can help by establishing clear boundaries so that your child knows exactly what is expected of him. One strategy that supports this is called visual supports, which are cues that help your child understand what will happen in his daily routine, explains how to do something step-by-step, and reminds him of important rules. Having visual cues can reduce power struggles, empowering children to become more independent and support self-regulation. Try creating the following visual supports by gluing simple photos or clip art on a piece of cardstock or manila folder:

♥ *First/Then board*- helps children understand the sequence of events (see Activity)



♥ *Rule chart*- Write down 1-2 simple rules of what your child CAN do (e.g., I sit in my car seat) along with the corresponding image. Allow your toddler to have input in creating the rules (e.g., What is a good rule to keep you safe in the car?)

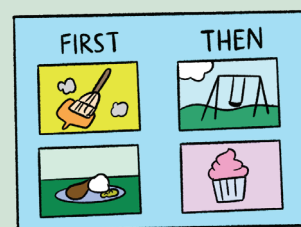
Activity for Toddlers: *First/Then Board*

What You Need:

- Cards included in this packet
- Pen
- Adhesive (glue, tape, or Velcro)
- Manila Folder (or cardstock)

What to Do:

1. Think of an activity in which your child has difficulty completing (e.g., cleaning up). Structure the day so that fun activities follow challenging ones. For example, first we clean up, then we go outside.
2. Use the cards included in this packet or create your own based on your activities.
3. Cut out the cards. Optional: Attach cards to thicker paper, or make cards sturdy by covering them with clear tape.
4. Using a manila folder, write "First" on the top, left side. Write "Then" on the top, right side. Use glue, tape, or Velcro to post the challenging activity under "First" and the preferred activity under "Then." This will increase the likelihood that your child will complete the activity on the "first" side.
5. Celebrate! Provide feedback after your child completes the "first" activity and describe what is happening next (e.g., "You cleaned up all the toys. Now we get to go outside!")



(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)

Preschoolers

Your preschooler is becoming increasingly independent, wanting to assert himself in ways such as eating preferences, choosing his own clothing, and negotiating solutions to conflicts. This may sometimes result in a power struggle. If your child needs support, state what needs to be done in a firm but loving way. For example, "You need to clean up the toys so we can have snack." This differs from asking, "Can you clean up?", which tells him that he has the option to refuse. If your child begins to clean up, provide descriptive praise for his actions (e.g., You cleaned up the blocks so quickly!).

What if your child does not comply? Raising your voice may only escalate the power struggle. Try to remain calm and provide two GREAT choices that allow his autonomy without compromising expectations. This gives the power back to your child, increasing the likelihood of compliance. Here are some ideas for appropriate choices during difficult times of the day:

- ♥ Do you want to hop like a bunny to the bathroom or would you like to fly like a bird?



- ♥ Do you want to be in charge of putting away the blocks or the cars?

Although you might be able to avoid a power struggle by providing two great choices, sometimes a child will dig his heels in and refuse. When children are upset, it often helps to know that someone understands their feelings. De-escalate the interaction by calmly saying, "I know cleaning up is hard and you want to keep playing. This is hard for you." After your child begins to relax, repeat the two choices again. If he still doesn't comply, calmly help him to clean up using empathetic language, "This is hard. You are angry, but it's time to clean up." When you provide empathy and understanding, it reduces the power struggle.

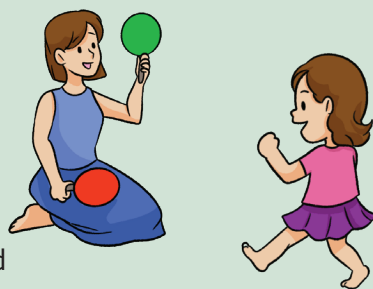
Activity for Preschoolers: Red Light, Green Light

What You Need:

- Red object
- Green object

What to Do:

1. Find an object that is red and one that is green (e.g., a red plate, a green towel).
2. Take your child to an open space and tell him the rules of the game.
3. You will start at one end of the room (the finish) and he starts on the opposite end (starting line). When you say Green Light, he can move towards you.
4. If you say Red Light, he needs to freeze.
5. Continue to call out green or red, holding the objects up as he moves across the room.
6. When he makes it to the finish line, celebrate! Then change roles and let him be in charge of the lights.



This game helps develop impulse control and executive functioning skills, giving him a sense of control.

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)

How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

Physical Development

- ♥ Use and strengthen large muscles such as neck, arms, and legs
- ♥ Use and strengthen small muscles such as facial muscles, fingers, hands, and toes

Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Develop a close bond with you
- ♥ Feel important and good about himself

Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Develop his communication and receptive language skills
- ♥ Build verbal skills, vocabulary, and use of descriptive language



Cognitive Development

- ♥ Develop his thinking and problem-solving skills
- ♥ Learn to ask and answer questions

Kids in the Kitchen

Cooking teaches valuable lessons such as math (quantities, measurement), science (how matter changes), fine motor (stirring, pouring), and literacy (print awareness). As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show her how to handle items safely and allow her to do as much as she is capable of. Praise his efforts, and ask questions throughout the process to encourage his thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

Sloppy Joe Biscuit Cups

Adapted from Taste of Home <https://www.tasteofhome.com/recipes/sloppy-joe-biscuit-cups/>

Ingredients:

- 1 pound lean ground beef (90% lean)
- 1/4 cup each finely chopped celery, onion and green pepper
- 1/2 cup barbecue sauce
- 1 tube (12 ounces) refrigerated flaky biscuits (10 count)
- 1/2 cup shredded cheddar cheese

Directions:

1. Heat oven to 400°. In a large skillet, cook beef and vegetables over medium heat until beef is no longer pink, 5-7 minutes, breaking up beef into crumbles; drain.
2. Stir in barbecue sauce; bring to a boil.
3. Reduce heat; simmer, uncovered, 2 minutes, stirring occasionally.
4. Separate dough into 10 biscuits and have keiki help flatten to 5-in. circles.
5. Press onto the bottoms and up sides of greased muffin cups. Fill with beef mixture.
6. Bake until biscuits are golden brown, 9-11 minutes. Have keiki help sprinkle with cheese and bake until cheese is melted, 1-2 minutes longer.



Resources

***Parenting Without Power Struggles* by Claire Lerner, LCSW-C**

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/parenting-without-power-struggles>

Written by licensed clinical social worker and child development specialist, Claire Lerner shares tips for parents to help avoid power struggles and how to respond when they happen.

How to Help Your Child Have a Successful Bedtime – Backpack Connection Series

https://challengingbehavior.org/docs/backpack/BackpackConnection_routines_bedtime.pdf



Young children thrive on predictable routines. This resource can support families at home and school as they establish a nap/bedtime routine, thereby reducing power struggles during this transition.

Suggested Books

Discover these books and more at the **Hawai'i State Public Library** www.librarieshawaii.org.

Infants and Toddlers

***Baby Faces* by Margaret Miller**

This adorable book of baby expressions is perfect for capturing baby's attention and introduces them to their first book of feelings

***Stop, Go, Yes, No!: A Story of Opposites* by Mike Twohy**

This funny picture book highlights an enthusiastic dog and a less-enthusiastic cat on an adventurous chase. Teach toddlers new vocabulary and its meaning through this hilarious book of opposites..

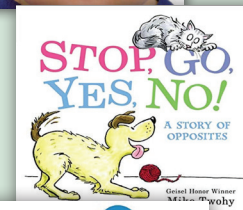
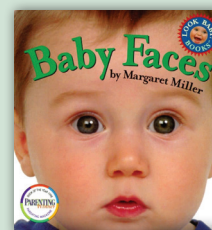
Preschoolers

***Tough Guys Have Feelings Too* by Keith Negley**

Did you know that superheroes have feelings too? This book teaches keiki that everyone has feelings and that it's okay to show them.

***The Little Red Hen: Hawaiian-Style* by Jennifer Morgan**

In this local version of the classic tale of the Little Red Hen, friends learn about helping others and showing aloha.



Learning to Grow is a project of the University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, with funding from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services. Visit our website at www.learningtogrowhawaii.org or visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii and Instagram @uhlearningtogrow