

Responding Effectively to Power Struggles

For Parents of Preschoolers (Ages 3–5)

Why Power Struggles Happen

At ages 3–5, children are learning independence. Saying “no!” or resisting rules is often a way of testing boundaries and practicing control. Power struggles are normal, but how parents respond makes a big difference.

Common Triggers

- Transitions (bedtime, leaving the park, turning off the TV)
- Limits on choices (“No more candy”)
- Tiredness or hunger
- Wanting attention



Parent Strategies That Help

Stay Calm and Steady

- Take a deep breath before responding
- Keep your voice calm and firm
- Remember: matching their big emotions with your own only fuels the struggle

Offer Limited Choices

- Give two acceptable options
- Example: “Do you want to brush your teeth before or after putting on pajamas?”

Set Clear, Consistent Limits

- State the rule simply and without debate

Examples: “We use gentle hands.” “Toys stay on the floor not on the table.”

Use Positive Attention

- Notice cooperation right away
- Praise effort, not just results

Redirect, Don't Argue

- Shift their focus to something else

Example: “You don’t want to leave the park. Let’s race to the car and see who gets there first!”

Pick Your Battles

- Ask yourself: Does this matter for safety or respect?
- Save firm “no’s” for the big stuff (safety, respect, health)
- For smaller things, try flexibility

Model Calm Problem-Solving

- Show them how to express feelings with words

Example: You feel mad that it’s bedtime. You can tell me, “I’m mad, but bedtime is still now.”

What to Avoid

- Long lectures (kids tune out)
- Yelling, threats, or bribes (they escalate or create new battles)
- Giving in after saying “no” (this teaches them to argue harder next time)

Remember

Power struggles are a normal part of development. Each calm, consistent response helps your child learn self-control, problem-solving, and respect for limits. Over time, the struggles lessen and cooperation grows.