How Do I Stop the Power Struggles?

You can step out of the argument without giving in.

Does this sound familiar? You have a repeated argument where both of you keep making the same points but get no closer to a resolution. Frustration often leads to raised voices or long silences.

Power struggles often grow when both people are trying to make the other agree with them. Parents may explain, persuade, threaten, or defend a decision repeatedly. The child argues back, and soon the conversation is more about winning than solving anything.

You can step out of the argument without giving in. Explain your decision clearly and offer to hear out your child in the event they have a concern or tell you something you haven't considered. Listening doesn't necessarily mean changing your mind. You might say, "Tell me what I'm missing." If there is new information that may impact your decision, you may want to consider it. If the same demands are simply being repeated, you can say, "We have talked this through. I'm taking a break now."

Save problem-solving for a time when both of you are calm and can spend time on it. Instead of arguing every evening about dishes, you might ask them, "What would work for you to make this chore easier to get done?" Maybe breaking up the task into parts, doing it at a different time, or a shared reminder would help.

As children grow older, they become more responsible for making their own decisions, even when those choices worry or disappoint you. With an adult child, you cannot control what they do, but you can decide what you are willing to do, what support you can offer, and what behaviors you will allow in your home.

Parents of teens have a greater responsibility to provide guidance, supervision, and protection. You can still help them develop independence by offering choices that are appropriate for their age and maturity. For example, you might allow your child to choose when to complete a household responsibility while making it clear that the responsibility must be completed. As children grow, gradually giving them more responsibility helps them practice making decisions and learning from the results.

Situation

Your adult child lives at home, and you have agreed that they will help with household responsibilities by doing the dishes after dinner and taking out the garbage once a week. Lately, they have not been following through. You find yourself constantly reminding them, and what starts as a simple request often turns into the same frustrating argument.

Instead of

You: "The dishes are still in the sink, and you haven't taken out the garbage again! How many times do I have to remind you?"
Child: "I'll get to it. Stop nagging me."
You: "There you go again! You agreed to do these things, but you never follow through."

Child: “I said I'll do it! What's the big deal?”
You: “The big deal is that I'm tired of doing everything around here. You're an adult, and you should act like one!”
Child: “Nothing I do is ever good enough for your high standards!”
You: “Well, then maybe you should find somewhere else to live where the standards are lower!”

In this version, a disagreement about household responsibilities quickly turns into a personal argument. Both become defensive, and the original problem gets lost in the frustration. Threats made in anger may also damage trust without leading to any real change.

Try this

You: “I noticed the dishes haven't been done, and the garbage wasn't taken out this week. We agreed those would be your responsibilities while you're living here.”
Child: “I've been busy. I'll do it later.”
You: “I understand you've had a lot going on, but it's important to me that we share the responsibilities around the house.”
Child: “Why do you always make such a big deal about everything?”
You: “I'm not trying to argue with you. I'm asking that you follow through on what we agreed.”
Child: “Fine! I'll do it when I get around to it.”
You: “I hear you. I don't want us to keep having the same argument. Let's talk tomorrow about whether this agreement is working and what we each need to do going forward.”
Child: “Whatever.”
You: “Okay. We can leave it there for tonight.”

In this version, the parent stays calm, avoids criticism, and does not get pulled into another argument. They clearly communicate their expectations without blaming or threatening their child. A calm conversation could also result in finding a reasonable solution that works for both of you.

Think about it

1. When your child doesn't follow through on an agreement, how do you usually respond? Does your response help solve the problem, or does it lead to another argument?
2. What could you say or do differently to stay calm, make your expectations clear, and avoid getting pulled into the same argument again?

References:

Partnership to End Addiction. (2024). *The Partnership Model: A guide for peer parent coaches and families supporting a loved one with substance use challenges.*

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