

BEAUTIFUL BOUNDARIES, SAFE STRUCTURE, AND LOVING LIMITS: GIVING KIDS WHAT THEY DESERVE

For Parents

Dr. Lorraine Fox

A child or teens home is meant to be both a safe haven and a “laboratory” to learn life lessons in a safe environment. If one’s childhood is fortunate, a person will learn how the world operates and how to navigate successfully through the various social conventions so that one can enjoy a contented, successful (fulfilling) adult life. With this in mind, we will address one of the more difficult formulas to be analyzed in the life-lab called Home: balancing the need and desire for autonomy with the world’s expectations for conformity in a number of areas. This lesson is learned through the parental “gift” of predictable limits and boundaries.

This article will address parents raising their own children. A future version will be designed for those working with children in out of home care (foster homes, group homes, and residential treatment centers).

When parents are willing to do the work required to help their children operate within limits, the ultimate benefit is that children develop habits of self-control and learn to operate within safe and socially acceptable boundaries and limits. I want to be clear that this is **work**. It is perfectly normal for children of all ages to struggle against having to comply with limits and expectations that go against what they would like to do. This struggle is intensified at various points in development, particularly in young toddlers and then again in adolescence. It is also true that different children have problems with limits based on temperament, so it isn’t always easy to define problems you can anticipate based on age.

Striking the balance between autonomy and the need for supervision can be stressful for children and parents alike.

The idea of a “boundary” comes from nature, where we observe that various systems are distinguished from each other by their boundaries. We know where one tree leaves off and another begins; we know one rock from another because each is held together by a boundary. In nature, boundaries are literal and objective. Things are different for us humans. Boundaries for humans are often subjectively set, and therefore more difficult to arrange and define. In almost all cultures, for examples, families are contained within boundaries, be they huts, tents, apartments,

houses, etc. Definitions of “family” are subjective, and family boundaries are not governed by laws of nature, but by arbitrary rules, often referred to as “operating rules”. For example, each family decides how rigid or how flexible the literal boundary to their dwelling is. Some families keep the door unlocked; some keep it locked. Some families allow certain people to come into the “boundary” without knocking, some families want everyone to ring the bell or knock, and wait to be let in. Most of us give our children “rules” about entry: for example, don’t let anyone in that you don’t recognize. These rules are meant to keep the people inside the boundary safe.

A boundary is not necessarily a barrier, but a protective wall that regulates coming and going. Protective parents are careful to keep young children inside the boundary, to regulate who has access to their children through the boundary, and to decide when it is safe for their children to leave the boundary. Young children, like some pets, will try to escape by running through an open door. We then begin to train them (both children and pets) to “stay”, even if the door is open. The implication is that you are safe inside, and not necessarily safe outside. As children age, they get more permission to leave the protection of their boundary, often to go into another approved boundary. In healthy families, adults control access into the boundary – who comes in, who goes out, where they go, when they are due back, etc. Of course parents of teens know that this whole issue becomes quite tense as adolescents begin to resent having adults exercise this kind of control. We’ll talk more about that later. This month we’ll introduce the topic. For living creatures, boundaries are not always literal. Another important boundary is what is referred to as a “role” boundary. That is, there is meant to be clarity about what role, as well as position (title), a parent has with regard to growing healthy children. Maintaining healthy role boundaries can also be quite stressful, as children and teens resent being told what they can and cannot do, where they can and cannot go, and what issues in the family are shared with them and which are kept between the adults. It is easier to be a friend than to be a parent, but children have other friends and do not need their parents as friends. They need their parents to be parents.

While there is nothing easy about setting up and maintaining strong, safe boundaries for children and teens, it is helpful to know how important it is for them. Young people who have not been prepared to operate within clearly established boundaries can struggle for their entire lives and experience many unnecessary and unpleasant consequences. There is no time and no place in life where limits and boundaries are not imposed, and remembering how important it is to help our children become comfortable with this reality can help us struggle

through the inevitable strains of imposing limits on those who don't yet understand how important these lessons are.

Children/teens need clearly established boundaries to “bounce off of” when they try to stretch too far for their own well being. Boundaries are a way of respecting immaturity, understanding that safe judgment develops slowly and over many years. Boundaries do not need to be harsh or hurtful, but firm enough to provide safety and security. As children grow in maturity, boundaries can be “stretched” by parents according to their best judgment, hopefully in collaboration with children and teens so they have an understanding of why decisions are made. Children/teens who experience total inflexibility will feel angry and resentful. Those who experience too much “stretch”, resulting in inconsistency and vagueness, feel unsure and less confident. With this in mind, parents should always take the long view: how will my behavior with my children today affect their adjustment to life later? This ability to see down the road is part of maturity; parents should have it when children don't. The title for this article is not one that would have been chosen by children. It is for adults to understand that sometimes children and teens will resent and misunderstand what, in the long run, is good for them. Later, they will understand that limits are provided because we love them and want them to learn how to live well.

There is a strong interaction between boundaries and limits. The primary purpose of limits is also for protection. Knowing what “goes” and what doesn't “go” in the house provides a sense of relief and comfort, as well as a sense of annoyance. Later on, when teens seem to rebel against those limits, remember that the reason they can rebel is that they are there in the first place, and there is some safety in pushing against a wall that doesn't give, or doesn't give so much as to be unsafe. Having nothing to rebel against causes children to feel unloved and unsafe.

Fly fishing vs. trolling

Setting limits for young people is a lot like fishing: a constant process of letting go and reeling in. As someone who makes a living dealing with things when they've gone wrong, I can tell you that the “school” of fishing you subscribe to EARLY in your child's life will have a lot to do with your experience living with them as teenagers. If you subscribe to the “fly fishing” school of child rearing – giving kids a whole lot of line while they are young – they will behave like trout when you try to reel them in later! The reason fly fishing is sport is because of the fight fish give when they realize they've been hooked. I strongly suggest you engage in “troll fishing” with your children – giving them a little bit of line when they are

young, and slowly giving them more as they prove they can handle more freedom responsibly.

It is a struggle for both the fisher (parent) and the fish (child/teen) to come to a healthy balance in giving children and teens appropriate amounts of autonomy in order to learn self control, and appropriate limits in order to protect them from immature impulses. As children grow in maturity, which is often quite different from chronological age, parents can make adjustments to imposed limits when they feel confident in their child's judgment. It is never safe to adjust limits based on age. Different children develop differently, and limits are meant to keep children safe until they can provide their own limits. Emotional age may vary considerably from chronological age. The discretion of parents to loosen or tighten limits and controls is crucial to the well being of their children. Our position – parent – has an inherent “role” attached to it, as we've discussed. This role is to act in accordance with our mature judgment, and not to react to the wishes or demands of our children, especially when those demands contradict evidence of responsible behavior and previous examples of sound judgments about what it is they are demanding to do.

Limits, like boundaries, have as their primary purpose safety and protection. Until children can protect themselves, adults provide supervision so that they can step in at any moment when children's behavior might cause them, or another, harm. As children **demonstrate** – through behavior not through communication – that they can behave safely with less supervision, we step back and give them more autonomy. Children and teens will **show** us how much freedom they can handle responsibly. Resentment about limits is part of immaturity and the struggle for independence, and should never be taken as a sign that the parent should “back off”. For the well being of children, responsible adults listen to behavior as well as to verbal requests and demands. In a respectful way, they share their observations and insights, and their commitment to provide their children what they need until they learn to provide it for themselves.

Iron bars vs. rubber bands

Keeping children in boundaries that have no give teaches them only resentment and anger. When humans are denied their need to express some autonomy they turn on the “prison guard” and cease engaging in a mutual relationship. Only a relationship of give and take can give us the buoyant feeling of freedom that puts joy into a relationship. Battered wives and controlling husbands are not enjoying a satisfying relationship. Parents who rule with an iron hand also deprive their

children of the chance to experience the satisfaction that comes from “working things out”.

As children begin to mature, they begin “rubber-banding” with parents and other adults responsible for their care. The stretch limits, move away, test their range. But when we perceive that they are becoming overwhelmed or confused, they need to be “snapped back” into caring arms – figuratively, if not literally. Rubber-banding from both ends cause relationships to “sting” sometimes. Sometimes we treat them as if they were as mature as they think they are, and then find that they are not. Sometimes we want to trust, but then become frustrated at a lack of judgment. Sometimes they become angry when we do not agree about how responsible they are. This pattern can continue for many years, and it our intention to do “right” by them that allows us to remain steadfast in our role as limit-setter. Children and teens (and even adults) need a secure base to stretch from. That is, they need to know where the “walls” are – the places that have no give, where no negotiations are possible.

Determining appropriate limits presents many challenges. What’s too far away, and what’s too close? We try to be interested, without being snoopy. We don’t want to be “square”, but should not try to act too “hip”. We are asked to blend into the scenery, but we need to stay visible enough to provide ego strength when judgment wobbles. It is important that parents never feel guilty for imposing limits on the behavior of children/teens. There are limits – restrictions – in almost all situations in life. Limits exist in jobs, in relationships, and in personal endurance. Adults who neglect imposing structure, and teaching children to respect and operate within limits, are depriving them of something they are “owed”. Further, they are setting them up to have trouble when they encounter the limits imposed by social situations.

One of the signs of immaturity in almost all teenagers is that they have a notion that when they turn eighteen they are going to be “free”. It is the adults’ role to teach them that freedom is relative, and never complete. Living in a “free” society does not mean that we can do whatever we want, whenever we want, wherever we want! **What freedom really means is that we are free to make choices and then live with the consequences of our choices!** It is the parent’s job to impose consequences, or limits to autonomy, when the choices made by their children would not serve them well in the “real world”. **A mature concept of freedom does not imply not having any limits!**

At the same time, living as an adult does not imply total predictability. We may get up around the same time every morning, but some mornings we may have to rise earlier, or, we may get to sleep in. Most adults have a time when they usually go to bed, but sometimes we stay up later, or go to bed earlier. Issues that arise from these kinds of “inconsistencies” involve learning to predict consequences, and learning to plan ahead.

Life does not go on in monotonous, rigid fashion which is a relief because it allows us to vary in parenting “style”. A degree of “consistency” between parents provides children a sense of security. Consistency, fortunately, does **not** mean “the same as”, so we don’t have to be “robot” parents – identical to each other - to provide security. Consistency does not mean “identical”, but means “not in contradiction with”, so even though parents might approach things a little differently, children can relax knowing that when established limits are not respected, “something” will happen. What consequence they experience might vary a little between parents, but the only thing that would be inconsistent would be if no consequence was given for disrespect for limits.

When dealing with teens, we don’t always need to “lay down the law”, unless an issue involves safety or personal values. There really aren’t many “laws” for personal habits. Rather, as children mature, it is time to move into more of a guidance mode, where we help them figure out how to make exceptions, and what the results of those departures will be. In this relationship, we shift our role from imposer/controller to “mentor”. Both children and teens need to practice using their own discretion with regard to operating within limits, under our supervision. In order for children/teens to learn what to base “good judgment” on, adults must be willing to share how they go about making their own judgments, when to stick within customary confines and habits, and when to make exceptions to their own routines. We want to sit down together and carefully consider whether a particular situation is one where “stretching” limits may be okay, and why.

Remember that “judgment” is totally subjective, and children/teens may not appreciate our judgment and the reasons we decide what we do. However, since they are learning to develop good habits of judgment, we want to teach them what judgment is, and how one chooses what criteria to use to either stick to, or extend, personal limits. It is not important that they agree with us, but it is important that they understand the process of exercising judgment.

Boundaries, Structure, Limits and Power/Control Struggles

We've been talking about the need to use firm boundaries and limits to provide security for children, and also about the need for "flexible" boundaries and limits to help children and teens develop safe judgment habits. This judgment arises from parents/adults responding to "struggles" between children/teens and themselves with regard to limits in ways that promote good problem solving skills. As we've discussed, children/teens often misinterpret the concept of "freedom", thinking that at some point there will no longer be limits imposed on them. As adults, we know better, and therefore it is important to begin early to build in the more mature concept of freedom. That is, being free means only that we are "free" to exercise our judgment, and then live with the consequences of our choices. We do this teaching best by staying out of our children's way when they struggle with issues of obedience and compliance, allowing them to learn important lessons for successful living. In other words, the "struggle" should be an internal one, not a struggle between us and the child.

Let's you and I fight!

In my experience as a trainer and consultant with organizations that care for large numbers of children and teens, the most frequent topic that comes up for discussion is that of dealing with "defiant", or non-cooperative children. It is the first workshop I ever gave, back in the 1970's, and to this day it is one of the most requested topics for staff training. My writings about the subject are also the most frequently downloaded.

So, let's begin talking about responding to "power and control struggles" in ways that keep our morale in tact, and help children use us, and our ability to set limits on their behavior, to figure out how to cope with a life issue that is difficult for many people – not just children!

Everyone wants their own way, and most of us sulk or get angry when we realize we're not going to get it. Feeling frustrated about having to "give in" is not a problem. Refusing to give in, and insisting on getting our way, is a huge problem. The world is not organized to accommodate the wishes of everyone who lives in it. Sometimes we get our way, sometimes we don't. What children don't yet realize is that this is not related to being a child; it is related to living with other people. Whenever we are caught up in an interaction with our children that contains "life issues" at the core, it is our job as adults to take the "long view". That is, when dealing with immediate issues and circumstances, it is our task to realize that when

we respond to children's behavior we are not just teaching them lessons for that moment, or that issue, but we are aiming to teach them how to live well when similar issues come up in other circumstances. When we do our "job" well, our children will be able to function well without us, because the lessons learned will always be with them. I don't think there are any situations where this concept is more difficult to remember than when we are being "taken on" by a child/teen who is fighting with us about something we want them to do.

Take a minute before reading further to think quietly about struggles you've had with your child or teen that felt like a struggle of power or control issues to you. How do you feel when you are in such a struggle? When you and your child or your teen are caught up in a struggle to see who will "win", or get their way, how do you feel? What do you feel like doing, when you are being defied or challenged? What do you secretly wish would happen? This is a very important exercise, and it is important to be honest with yourself. Checking in with your "typical" feelings when challenged by one of your children will give you a lot of very good information about yourself (which, by the way, each of your children already has), and will help to explain what exactly transpires between you and your children when a power control struggle arises. This is also true for anyone who works with children – teachers, babysitters, and anyone in a position to tell children what to do. Something very interesting happens **inside** of adults when a child refuses to do what they're told. What goes on inside of you? (This may be different for each parent.)

Some of the more common responses to children's defiant behavior include: anger, frustration, fear, feeling overwhelmed, wanting to escape, feeling sick or queasy). It is important to recognize your individual response to defiance for at least three reasons: 1. because it provides insight into your own make up; 2. because your children can see now only that you are having difficulty, but what kind of difficulty you are having; and 3. because it provides a clue to the kind of response you will be tempted to have if you act in haste or without thinking things through. Hence our moment of reflection here. I find that many adults are relieved to learn that almost all adults have some kind of emotional difficulty when faced with non-compliant behavior. By thinking about why we have so much trouble we increase our chance of having a more helpful response to such behavior, a response that feels better to us, and teaches kids important lessons about living in society and with other people, and particularly lessons about living with people with different abilities to impose controls on us. You've probably all either met someone, or worked with someone, dated someone, or (God forbid) married someone, who did not learn how to deal with this reality effectively!

Let's begin thinking about why we have so much trouble dealing calmly and easily with defiant behavior. After our personal contemplation, I'll pass along some helpful suggestions to help take the challenge out of these encounters.

Winning and Losing

Our culture is designed to be competitive - in sports, in school, on jobs, and even in relationships. We grow accustomed to being either a "winner" or a "loser" in different situations. "Success", in our society, is often or usually measured relatively - that is, how are we doing compared to others. Individuals vary in their opinions regarding how good this competitiveness is for people, and we will not debate the merits or lack of same here. What we do want to consider, however, is what happens between parents and their children when there is "competition" for getting one's way. Many of the difficulties experienced in these situations results from an inevitable feature of any interpersonal struggle – wanting to be a "winner" and not a "loser".

Power/control Struggles and Lessons for Life

We're going to stay focused again this month on the internal dilemmas often experienced by adults in positions of authority when children "defy" them and refuse to do as they are told. Last month we considered the issue of "winning" and how this is endemic in our culture. We also discussed taking the "long view", and using each interaction with our children to teach them a lesson that will help them to live well, and not just get through one particular issue or struggle. With this in mind, I invite you to think of "winning" as not necessarily just having your child comply and go along with you, but as having your child work through the whole issue of compliance, and sort out for themselves when it is a good idea, and when it is not a good idea, to go along with people. Hopefully this will be helpful in easing some of the challenge and frustration when there is a battle of wills between us and our child. Any one battle or skirmish is part of a long war- of learning to surrender one's will to that of another- which will go on for life. We don't want to be interested in "winning" just this one time by feeling powerful because someone obeyed us. We want to win the struggle to build maturity and good judgment into our children and teens. It's okay to feel like you're "losing" sometimes when your child is using contests with us to learn the important life lesson of getting along by going along – unless going along with someone would cause them to get hurt.

We are going to assume that we, as caring adults, only ask children and teens to obey us because what we are asking of them is good for them in some way. This

assumption will not necessarily be shared by them, but that's the reason mature people raise immature people. There is no reason we can't take the time to explain why something we are requesting is important for one reason or another, but we don't want to assume that our explanation will be accepted. At least not right now. Again, we're going for the game, not just the inning. Repeated explanations eventually build in the ability to reason and use judgment that is "sound". Repetition of our reasons, and the soundness of them, will gradually seep into our child's head until it becomes part of their own thinking. But, we digress. Back to the issue of "winning".

Why do we feel that we must "win" with a child and have them do things our way? Perhaps it's because we are finally getting our revenge. After years of being a child ourselves, and having to do what other people told us to do, now it's **our** turn to be obeyed! Sometimes it sounds silly when we say it, but many people have been willing to admit that there's something in us about this getting even, even though it may be a little embarrassing to say it. Many adults grew up in households where adult needs were catered to and where we almost "inherited" a way of thinking about conflicting needs. Adults win. Many of us also had the experience of being told what to do and never even being given a reasonable explanation. How many of us were told that the "reason" was – "because I said so", or "just do as I say", or "because I'm the mother". None of these were reasons, of course, but we were expected to accept them. This tempts us to think our children don't deserve real explanations. But hopefully we'd like to improve on some of the parenting practices that didn't feel too good to us when we were young.

Some parents do not do well with confrontations because they have had personal experiences of feeling out of control in other areas of their lives, and these same feelings get stirred up when their children take them on and refuse to obey. In such times it is important for us to use our adult maturity to remind ourselves that our children are not responsible for times when we felt out of control and thus have some desperate need to avoid those feelings. This should be a struggle within ourselves to resolve these issues, and not a struggle with our children, as if they are somehow responsible for stirring up these feelings.

Some parents think it is their "job" to make children obey! This sometimes is reinforced when others blame parents when their children are having problems! I think parents should be "blamed" when they are not parenting, not when their children are acting like children! It is a heavy burden to think that we can force children to do what we want them to do, and that it will be good for them. Of

course, we **can** force children to do what we want, because we are bigger and stronger, but this is not the kind of lesson we want to teach. **Might does not make right!** There are a myriad of world situations that we can point to that disproves that idea. What **is** right is to teach children how to obey, how to negotiate, how to cooperate, and what the realities of life are. One of the sad realities of life is that there are too many people sharing the earth for everyone to get their way! And as most of you well know, “too many people” can include one too many! One of the great struggles of partnering with another individual is when we realize that, despite what the colloquial saying states, the “two do not become one”. The two stay two, and negotiation becomes a must if the relationship is to survive and stay healthy.

So, working things out with our children when there is a clash of wills teaches many important lessons. It teaches them how to get along with adults. It teaches them how to keep friends. It teaches them how society works. Ultimately, it will teach them one of the important “tips” for keeping love alive in a long time relationship.

Keeping in mind that oppositional behavior provides an opportunity to teach these important lessons, we can hopefully take the fear out of such challenges. We can reframe these battles as important moments to give insights that will last a lifetime. With this frame of mind, we can approach power and control struggles in a more positive manner, knowing that this is not a contest between us and one child, but a confrontation for the child – using the adult to struggle with - with a problem that must be solved if they are to live peacefully in the world.

There is a verse in the Bible, in Proverbs, the book of wisdom where the writer says: “Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it.” This verse caused me consternation before I had my “epiphany”. I thought I knew plenty of people who had been “trained” properly who seemed to depart in significant ways. Then I realized I was focusing on their **behavior**, which of course no one can control once one becomes an adult. Then I think I uncovered the lesson – one that should bring good cheer to all parents and adults working hard to put life lessons into children’s heads. Let’s consider that what your child will not depart from are the lessons you have implanted indelibly in their minds. The “training” are those constant and consistent messages about how to live well and getting along with others. So, even if they depart behaviorally for a while, your droning inner voice will be there to guide them back onto a path of life that works well and brings positive rewards and contentment. How many of us have heard an adult say something about their parent – even if they live nowhere

close, or are even dead. “My mother would roll over if she.....; My father always told me.....” That’s our job: not to control our children, but to give them the wisdom they need to control themselves!

Reducing Power/Control Struggles: From Challenge to Confidence

As promised, I am going to suggest an **approach** to dealing with power/control struggles with your children and teens that is designed to: keep relationships positive while dealing with situations that don’t feel good to either parent/adult or child; minimize the negative feelings that often arise in adults when they are challenged by children; and teach important lessons for living to young people. Here are some specific suggestions for the next time they look you right in the eyes and say “NO!”

1. Personalize expectations

Sometimes we try to avoid a confrontation by pretending that it is some law of the land that we are trying to impose. “It’s time to go to bed”. “You know the rule”. “Stop that”! This is often done because the adult feels that there will be more power behind a universal law than if the request/demand is just something they want. In fact, taking this approach is less powerful than using a personal approach for a few reasons. One, children are not much interested in laws of the universe. They are interested in doing what they want to do. Second, the adult is often trying to avoid a personal confrontation, but a personal confrontation is inevitable, so why not just admit it by owning that it is **you**, and not the universe, that wants a child or teen to do something. Third, by avoiding a personal approach we may convey that we are somehow afraid of their non-compliance and are trying to grasp for a way to make their obedience seem more inevitable than it is. Most importantly, if we do not use a personal approach, we are taking away our most important teaching tool – our personal relationship with a child. So, instead of “It’s time for bed”, try “I’d like you to get ready for bed”. Instead of “you know the rule”, try, “you know what I expect”. Let’s face it, if there’s going to be a fight, it’s going to be with you, and not with a rule!

2. State your expectation (request, demand, rule) only once.

You probably have caught yourself telling your child/teen to do something over and over again. “I want you to take out the garbage”. “Please take out the garbage”. “Hey - what about the garbage!” “Have you forgotten about taking out the garbage?” Blah..blah..blah. I think the reason we do this is because we want to

fool ourselves into thinking that the reason we're not being obeyed is that we haven't been heard! Unfortunately, each time you repeat your request - on the phony grounds that you're not being obeyed because you're not being heard - you child/teen feels more powerful and you appear weaker. Ha. Ha. I hear you, but I'm doing it! If you're not being obeyed - let yourself acknowledge that it's happening. Don't pretend that your child is deaf. If they are not obeying you, they have decided not to obey you. The ball is now in your court! Time for a lesson: compliance, cooperation, negotiation, doing your part, etc.

3. Follow up only with questions. Toss the ball back into their court, by finding out why your request or demand is not being followed. Did you hear me? If so, why aren't you doing it? Am I asking something unreasonable? Do you understand the instruction and the reason? Why are you being defiant? Is there a reason you're not doing what I ask that I should know about? What can/should I do to help you follow a reasonable request? The important feature of this exchange is that you are staying in charge of the interaction, even though someone is being insubordinate. This questioning about the defiance prevents the child/youth from being able to avoid the issue. It also means that although they are doing what they don't want to do at the moment, they are also not having much fun. It would be probably be easier to just do what they've been asked!

4. Keep the focus on the young persons' difficulty with self control. We don't want the child/teen to think that **we** are having a problem because **they** are not obeying. You would be having a problem if you never asked your child to do anything. You'd be having a problem if you were being totally unreasonable. If, however, you are behaving like a parent and asking for cooperation with a task, and if you are asking something reasonable, and they are not doing it, **they** (alone) are having a problem! We want to find out what it is. They are struggling with something and we can help. Maybe it's just that they don't like to do things they don't want to do. Well, who does! Maybe they are caught in magical thinking that the world will revolve around them and what they want to do, and other people and what they might need are not important. We are using this moment, this struggle, to introduce or reinforce notions of responsibility and cooperation – whether the child is two or a teenager.

5. Be watchful of language. Be careful about using “controlling” language, both because it is not accurate, and because it tends to divert attention. “You need to”, as an example, is almost always not true. There are very few things kids “need” to do (...breathe, sleep, eat, go to the bathroom). Most things are optional. We try to hide from this reality sometimes, but saying things like: “I'm not asking you, I'm telling you”. So? Can you really **make** them? More importantly, do you want to “make them”. Where's the lesson there? The real challenge they must solve is not that people can make them do what they don't want to do, but that in our free society we let people decide what they are willing to do. And for every choice there is a consequence. We want to use these moments to bring home the truth of choosing your own consequences by choosing your own actions. The issue is not what we can make them do, but what they decide to do, and how this will impact them.

This brings us back to the importance of personalizing our expectations. We don't want to push children around with language. We have the right to ask them to do things, and we have good reasons. Now is the time to teach the art of negotiating, and cooperating, not the art of seeing who can make who do what. The truth is, kids have a choice about almost everything. Our task is to help them to choose wisely, and to understand the results of the choices they make. Ultimately, the quality of our lives is determined by the choices we make and the consequences they bring. Here's a chance to practice.

This lesson begins when we're two, and continues until the end. Parents are the child's first and most important "teacher".

6. Allow the child/youth to save face.

We talked earlier about the suggestion to be watchful of using "controlling" language when telling children/teens what we want them to do. It's bad for them, because it gives them ground to defy us because they realize we really can't **make** them do much, at least not without being hurtful to them. And it's bad for us because it tricks us into thinking that using forceful words will actually be the same as using force. The truth is, we don't want to raise children who only do what is expected of them when they are "forced" to do so. Here's our next suggestion, and an important one if other children – siblings, friends – are witnessing the stand off between parent and child.

No child likes to be seen as "giving in" when they have taken a defiant stance in front of other children, but it is especially important for teens, who like to be seen as taking charge of their own life. Adolescents deeply resent being put on the spot in front of their friends. In the scheme of life, it will not undermine our power if we give kids a face-saving way to comply with our request. We can try to find a way to work things out with them when they aren't in the spotlight. Try something like, "Okay – well that's not acceptable to me, but I'll leave you alone to think about it a little bit and we'll talk again later". Another approach is to say something like, "I'm going to go do something I have to do and I'll be back in a minute to pick up on this, because we're going to have to work something out about what it is I want you to do". Going away from them and leaving them alone with their "audience" gives them the chance to say something "cool" that makes it look like going along is their idea and not yours. "I'd rather do what she wants than have to listen to her going on and on. Let me take care of this to get some peace". It is only if we have an ego problem of our own that we would want them

to do something because we told them to and need to appear powerful or in control in front of other kids. Why not let them do what we want them to do because **they** decide they'd rather than because we have a need to look good as adults.

Sometimes kids take their parents on just to feel “cool” in front of their friends, and they get really stuck between wanting to impress their friends and wanting to please us. We can give them a way out of the bind by giving them ways to cooperate that meet both needs. The important thing for us is to feel comfortable enough with our authority that **we** don't feel the need to give in just because they are giving us a challenge in front of other young people. We are dealing with **two** legitimate needs. Parents have the need to set the agenda for deciding what is important to do, because they are (at least allegedly) the mature ones. Kids have the need to feel in self control and “strong”.

7. Always remain aware of your own internal process. Keep the issues clear. Check yourself if you notice that your ego is feeling challenged, or your self-worth undermined. Why is it so important for you to “win”? Notice if you're expecting your child/teen to be the “Private” responding to your “General”. If you realize that the issue is becoming one that has to do with you, rather than about what's good for your child, back out, cool down, and come back to the issue. It's also okay to tell your child/teen that you are having trouble with their attitude and you need a minute to adjust your own attitude before continuing to deal with them. They'll notice anyway, so why not just put it out there!

When an issue is really important, it is worth it to continue to hang in with the child/teen while **they struggle**, with the lesson that no one can count on always getting their way always in mind. In life, it will often be true that we have to go along with someone whether we want to or not. Better they figure this out with us than with someone who can cause real trouble for them, like teachers, police, or bosses.

A Win-Win Situation

Taking this kind of non-confrontational, negotiating “approach” to engaging in struggles for power and control with children that can lead to two very positive outcomes. The positive outcome for children is that they will have the opportunity to “practice” at home dealing with a struggle that will continue their entire lives, i.e. how to manage the tension brought about by having demands made on us that are contrary to what we want to do. The positive outcome for parents is to know that one of our “jobs” as parents is to be coaches in the game of life and guides on

the path to maturity. As the mature representative, there is no need for us to “compete” with children when there are conflicting desires between us and them. There is an order in things in nature for a reason. This is not just true for human parents, but for parents in most species. The young need the mature for their own protection and safety, even if they are tempted to leave the nest out of a sense of false (immature) confidence. Watch the mother cat go after her kittens when they climb over the basket and take a chance outside of the safe boundary that has been provided for them. You’ve probably all had the chance to watch as mama cat jumps out of the nest, grabs her “child” by the nap of the neck, and brings her/him back! Not that they (kittens) won’t try again. But mama is clear about her role and will only let them stray away when they are ready. Maybe it would be a good idea to watch the nature channel with your children and find parents in nature doing their job with boundaries and limit setting so your kids will know that this is the way nature has set it up – like it or not.

Concluding thoughts

If you make a commitment to yourself as a parent or an adult in another role of authority with children that you will avoid “struggling” with your children about your requests for compliance, you will find that a lot of the fear or annoyance is gone when you are presented with a challenge to your authority. “Reframing” the situation so that the focus is on the child/teen, rather than on your ability to control them, reduces the potential stress of such confrontations, keeps the relationship more positive, and keeps problems with compliance in the appropriate place. Knowing in advance how you’ll deal with defiance can change skepticism to confidence. It is also giving you a wonderful laboratory in which to teach your children how relationships work. Mature people negotiate. No one likes feeling controlled. Learning how to negotiate, how to find a way for both people with contrary wishes to work something out, will be a lesson that will serve them well for the rest of their life. It is also true that sometimes there is nothing to negotiate, and they will have to learn when it’s best to just go along, because the price for not going along is too big to pay.

For those of you with teenagers in your home, it may be interesting to read these columns on power and control struggles together. I’m not their parent so they don’t have to agree with me. Toss these ideas around together. It may be a wonderful adventure.