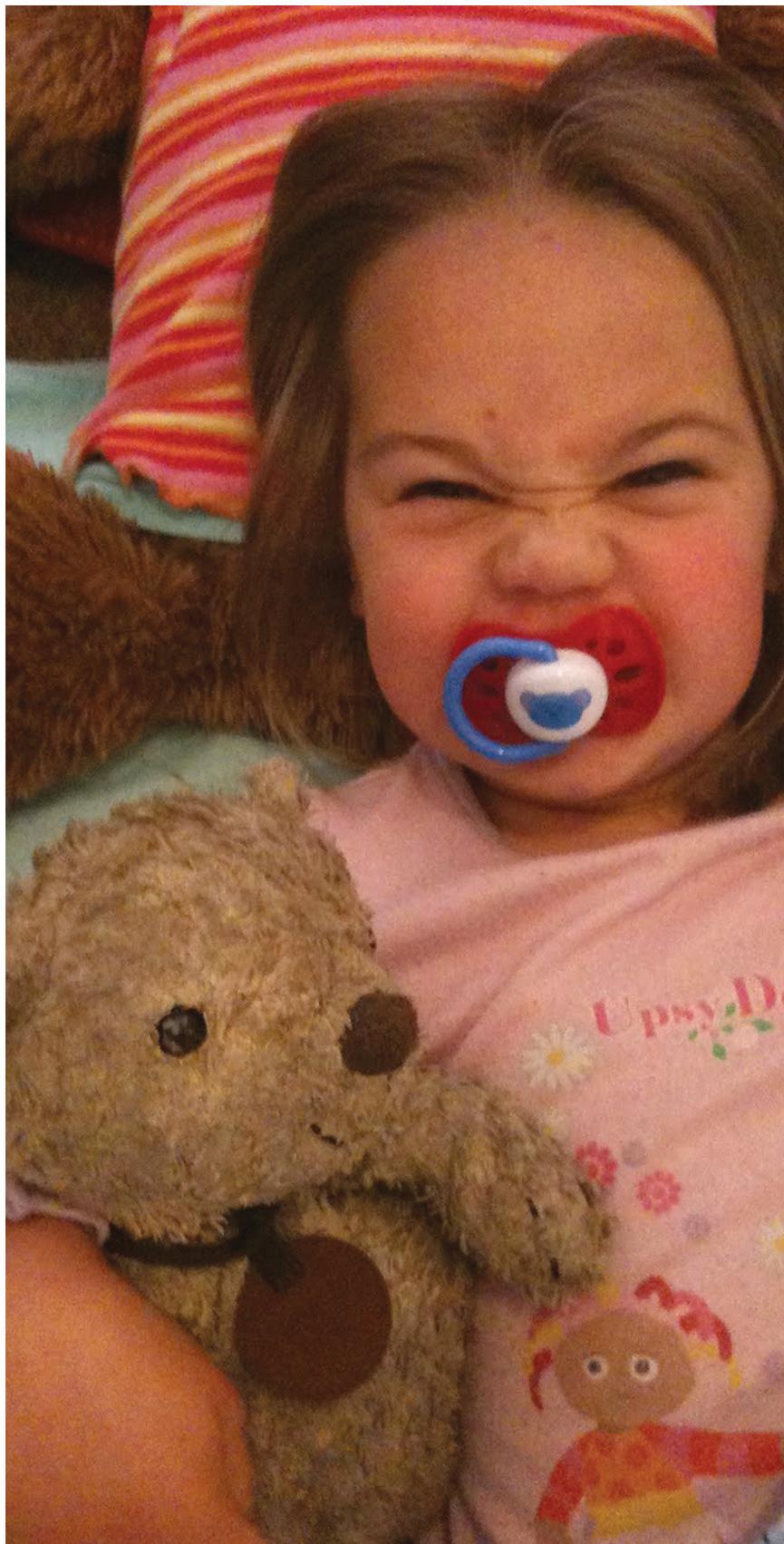


Avoid Power Struggles



By Dr. Jenn Berman

Around the age of eighteen months, children start to exert their will. They are now old enough to hold a thought or desire in their minds and are developmentally advanced enough to let those needs be known. Around this time children struggle with the emergent tasks of developing autonomy and initiative. We have all heard the infamous battle cry of the toddler, "I can do it myself!" This stage can be quite challenging for parents.

The more you attempt to control your children, the more likely you are to create power struggles. I am not advocating that you allow your children to make the rules, but I am recommending that you work with your toddler and use techniques and words that invite cooperation rather than resistance. One of the most striking characteristics of toddlers is their desire to please and help Mom and Dad. Knowing parents take advantage of this desire while allowing their children room for autonomy.

Power struggles tend to happen when you take power away from your children instead of guiding them to develop their own power in constructive ways. Your job as a parent is to teach your toddler how to focus her power in positive directions. Punishment and humiliation never accomplish this goal. Here are a few tools that will help:

Give kids the opportunity to make decisions as early as possible. Look for opportunities in infancy to let your child make choices: "Do you want the red blanket or the blue blanket?" "Do you want this pacifier or that one?" As she gets older, opportunities to make choices are constant: "Do you want to walk down the stairs or do you want me to carry you?" "Do you want peaches or pears?" Offering these choices sends a message to your child that you see her as a capable person with opinions and the ability to make decisions for herself. It also gets

her into the habit of making these choices—an essential life skill.

Give two acceptable choices whenever possible. Giving your child choices gives her power and makes it much less likely that she'll fight you. It is amazing how willing young children are to cooperate when they feel *they* have the power. At the end of a playdate recently, the visiting mother noticed that her daughter had picked up one of my kid's baby dolls and was growing very attached to it. "She's going to throw a huge tantrum when I take that away from her. Things are about to get very ugly around here," she joked, anticipating her daughter's behavior from previous experiences. Then, trying to avoid a meltdown, she asked me, "Would you mind asking her to give the doll back?" Fortunately, she was open to other ideas. "Why don't you try asking her if she wants to hand me the doll or put it back in the toy basket before you leave?" I suggested. The other

mom gave it a try and, much to her surprise, her daughter happily put the doll back in the basket and left the playdate smiling.

Remind your child that she has the power. After you have given your child two acceptable choices, remind her that the decision is up to her. Words like "You decide," "The choice is yours," "It's up to you," or "You choose" increase your child's sense of power in a healthy way—and give her less to resist.

Provide opportunities for your child to help. Because toddlers are hardwired to connect with others and to demonstrate autonomy, they often will resist a command but respond happily to requests for help. A command like "Go to the table now" is likely to be met with resistance, whereas a request like "I need your help. Would you please take the napkins to the table for me?" is likely to be met with a positive response.

Try the "as soon as" approach. Instead of the usual "We are not going to breakfast until you get your clothes on," which invites your toddler to test how long you are willing to go without breakfast, try "As soon as you have your clothes on, we can go to breakfast." The "as soon as" technique does not leave a lot for a child to resist.

Provide objective information so your child can make a decision. Instead of barking instructions like "Get your feet off the table" or, worse yet, indulging in character assassinations like "You are so rude! Get your feet off the table!" try providing objective information like "Feet belong under the table, not on the table." You can also use objective information to strengthen your family values—for example, "In our family we don't hit."

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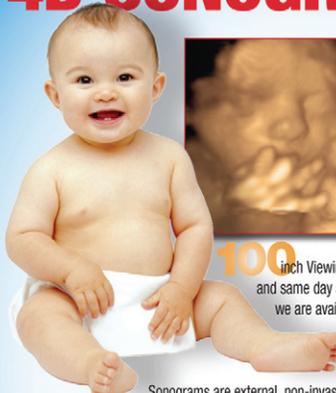
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