



## BRADLEY COUNSELING CENTER

### HOW YOU CAN HANDLE FAMILY POWER STRUGGLES

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With summer in full swing and schools setting learning models for the fall, kids and adolescents may be having difficulty coping with an ever-changing world.

This summer isn't what they had hoped for ... many activities have been canceled or postponed, getting together with friends looks different, pools are closed, and summer boredom may have set in. As a result, children and teens may be irritable, sad, angry, bored or frustrated. Add in the stress parents have about returning to work, continuing to work from home or worrying about finances and safety, and you have a perfect storm for parent/child power struggles.

If children are upset about missing activities, getting bored or frustrated with chores, they may start showing the stress through oppositional behavior.

Parents may feel like they're in a no-win situation -- they can address the behaviors and risk ending up in an argument, or they can "let it slide" and end up with more opposition next time.

In situations where kids are complaining about parents being "unfair" or "nagging them all the time," it is easy for parents to get pulled into pointing out how the statements aren't true -- giving examples of all they have done for the child to defend what they are doing. Kids will then roll their eyes and say "you never listen."

This pattern continues and arguments become the new sound of summer.

What is a parent to do when their child won't listen and won't do what they are told? What should we do when our child brings up the same complaint over and over? How do you change the interaction from conflict to dialogue?

The first step to changing these interactions sounds simple, but it is actually difficult to do -- pause. Pause when your child rolls their eyes or gets an "attitude" in their voice about the same thing again and again. Take a breath, and allow your own emotions to settle before engaging. This brief moment gives you the chance to enter the conversation with openness.

The next step is to be curious -- ask yourself "what is my child trying to tell me that I'm not hearing?"

If we can approach the conversation from a place of true curiosity about what our child is trying to tell us, they will notice and may be more willing to engage in the conversation. You will be able to ask questions about what specifically they are upset about, and they will be more likely to be honest with you. It is amazing how this subtle change -- from irritation about them not doing their chores to a curious question about why it hasn't happened, can open the door just a crack to improve communication and show our children we are listening.

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The third step is what we call the “grain of truth” strategy. This is really helpful in the situations where a child has a complaint and just won’t let go of it because there is some piece -- sometimes a very small piece -- that is valid and true. Acknowledging that piece that is true, while not necessarily removing the consequence (if one is warranted), can be very powerful for our children. It shows them that we hear them and can lead to strengthening our connection with our child.

Letting our child know that we see the piece that is true does not mean that we are saying their behavior is OK, but it is also much more than just hearing their perspective. It is looking for and finding the piece of their complaint that is actually valid.

Take, for example, an older child who constantly complains that their parent “loves their sister more” and “they are the only one who gets in trouble.” Knowing that as parents you have worked really hard to try to treat all your children fairly, you immediately feel that what your child is saying is not true and want to let them know that. In your mind, it simply is not the case.

If you pause, you may be able to feel less defensive and ask a curious question to yourself about what your child may be saying that you aren’t hearing ... is it possible that there is a piece to their complaint that is true? This curious stance can help you ask questions of your child to hear what is upsetting them in the moment.

A simple question of “was there something specific that makes you feel that way?” can open up the dialogue. As the child talks about how she got TV taken away for yelling at her sister but her sister didn’t get in trouble for calling names and teasing, you can start to hear the “grain of truth” -- you hadn’t given the sister a consequence because you thought the teasing was “just playing around.” Letting your child know that you see that their sister should also have gotten a consequence will help your child feel heard -- while still showing that yelling at their sister was also not OK.

Like with all strategies, the “grain of truth” strategy has some traps to avoid when talking with your child. First, once you see your piece in the situation, don’t apologize profusely or take the whole situation on as your fault. This pitfall lets the child “off the hook” in terms of their contribution to the situation.

Bio: Dr. Sandra Clavelli, PsyD, Clinical Psychology, is Director of Clinical and Outpatient Services as Allendale Association in Lake Villa. Allendale’s Bradley Counseling Center is currently offering phone and video teletherapy services to adults and children struggling with COVID-19 issues, experiencing other mental health concerns, or looking to build on their strengths. For more information, visit [Allendale4kids.org](http://Allendale4kids.org) or call 847-356-3322.