

From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy



— Situation —

Our dentist insists that I brush my daughter's teeth, but it has become increasingly impossible as she gets older. She is now four, and last night I actually squeezed her jaw to force her to open her mouth. I felt ashamed of myself. I know that I have to protect her teeth with proper brushing, but I hate these daily battles. It seems we fight over just about everything.

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— Solution —

As you squeeze your daughter's jaw, chase her down the hall, or whatever else it takes to get that toothbrush inside her mouth, ask yourself: "Just what bad thing am I trying to prevent here?" Tooth decay? I know teeth are vital — I use mine all the time — but I truly believe I would enjoy chewing a whole lot less if I had to spend a lot of my energy clamping or jutting my jaws to prove that I was in control. Alternately, I might decide to do things as minimally as possible, in a version of passive power. The battles you describe are about power, not teeth. When children grow up being forced into compliance, they begin to believe that they must prove to the world that no one can make them do anything. This forms part of their belief system, and beliefs are potent forces. Let's look at power struggles themselves.

There are three things to remember: Power struggles take two. Where there is a winner, there must be a loser. The opposite of control is cooperation.

Power struggles take two.

Try pushing your hand against the wall. Push good and hard. The wall offers resistance. Now remove your hand from the wall and push again. Poof! Nothing. Without something to push against, there is no struggle.

It takes two for a power struggle. Whose behavior can you control? Stop being the wall! When your daughter plants her feet in defiance, calmly leave the room and request that she let you know when she is ready to cooperate. "Fine!" you say. "She will be delighted and we'll never get anything done." Actually she will probably be astonished, if not struck dumb, that you have changed the script. "You can't make me!" she might taunt as she shadows you into the next room. Amazingly, you don't respond. Just

*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

this much, this breaking of the usual power struggle dynamic, will make a huge difference. Once the old pattern is broken, there is room for growth.

Let's apply this to toothbrushing. Your daughter is gloating, maybe even twirling the toothbrush as a makeshift baton to get you engaged. You are calmly rearranging the shampoo bottles, or maybe brushing your own teeth, even humming to yourself. Of course you may be thinking, "This is stupid. This idea is clearly not going to work. Her teeth will fall out. Everyone will think I am a wimp. I am not sure I can keep from screaming if she drops that toothbrush one more time!" And yet you continue not to respond. Congratulations! You have achieved step one of your three-step plan to eliminate power struggles — you managed self-control.

Where there is a winner, there must be a loser.

Power struggles are win-lose contests. Was raising a loser ever part of your long-range vision as a parent? The key here is to get to situations that are win-win. Win-win means everyone feels good about the outcome.

Back to the bathroom and the *toothbrushes as swords* scenario with which we began. You asked your daughter to let you know when she was ready to cooperate. For the past two nights, the toothbrush has remained in a pristine state of unuse. Let's look for some win-win options.

The first and best one usually involves working with the child to devise a solution. Admit that you are worried about her teeth but that you do not want to fight over tooth-

brushing anymore. Then ask if she is willing to help you come up with a better plan.

Children love to help and they have great imaginations. Be ready to listen, stay curious, and do not find fault with every suggestion she makes. Look for a solution. She wants to brush without your help. Suggest that she brush alone after breakfast and that she start the job at bedtime, then allow you to help her finish each night. She feels empowered, listened to, and competent. You don't have to save up for her future dentures and can breathe easily when she flashes her sparkling choppers at the dentist.

Another solution might be that you trade favors. She gets to brush your teeth while you brush hers. That could turn into a shared time of fun, laughter, and intimacy rather than a daily wrestling match. These are just possibilities. Figure out what works for both of you.

The opposite of control is cooperation.

When we invite children to help solve problems, they are much more likely to cooperate. The key here is the word *invite*. We invite people to parties, to dinner, or to the movies. Sometimes they decline. If your friend says "No thanks" when you invite her to a movie, do you show up and duct tape her to the car carrying her fireman-style over your shoulder into the theater? Hopefully not. "But," you say, "my friend's teeth aren't rotting in place." Well, if you can't live with the idea of inviting your child to do certain things, at least offer limited choices. Choices feel good. We all like to have some say in what we do. If your friend agrees to go to the movies this weekend, maybe she could at least choose which movie.

Let's look for some choices. "Do you want to put the toothpaste on the brush or do you want me to?" That is a nice choice. It implies that toothbrushing is soon to follow without offering a trigger for resistance. Or perhaps try, "Would you like to have your teeth brushed before or after bath time?" Another healthy choice that implies the actual toothbrushing is a given.

Healthy Teeth

Of course healthy teeth are important, but there are plenty of ways to achieve stunning smiles AND healthy self-esteem at the same time. Pediatric dentist Dr. Steven Smutka offers these tips. He recommends that parents begin brushing from the appearance of the child's first tooth (about four to six months of age). "Use a soft brush and make toothbrushing a daily habit." He adds that positioning is important. Once your child is able to stand, allow her to watch in the mirror so that she can see what is going on. Parents need to be positioned so they can see into the child's mouth.

Power involves many things. Take charge of things within your control. Toothbrushing is largely a dexterity issue. It is hard for children to maneuver the toothbrush and keep at it for the recommended two minutes. At about age five, consider getting a child-size electric toothbrush to improve your child's efficiency at this task.

Follow wise eating habits. Without candy, sugary sodas, or chewing gum, teeth are much more likely to flourish. Offer an apple for a bedtime snack instead of a sugary cracker and milk. Healthy teeth and power struggles are not interchangeable. Put the power struggles behind you. *Stay focused on what YOU do — not what you will try to MAKE your child do.*