

Parent-Youth Power Struggles - How a RJ Facilitator Can Help

RYCNC Lunch & Learn Series
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What are power struggles?

They often arise during adolescence when teens start to demand more autonomy.



Parents view this behavior as defiance, and a challenge to their authority.



Parents struggle to maintain control while youth instinctively challenge their authority.

As RJ
Facilitators,
What do
we see in
youth?

**Youth acting out –
asserting their
autonomy,
pushing limits,
even breaking the
law.**

**Experimentation
with drugs,
tobacco, alcohol,
skipping school,
gaming/gambling.**

**High-risk
behaviors –
speeding,
extreme sports,
sexuality.**

**Health concerns –
cutting, dieting,
lack of sleep.**

As RJ Facilitators, What do we see in parents?

**Parents that hover
and place
unrealistic
demands**

**Parents that deny
their youth's
behaviors**

**Parents that blame
each other**

**Parents that shame
their youth**

**Parents that
become physically
abusive**

**Parents that
become
emotionally
abusive**

A group of diverse people, including a woman and a man, are shown from the chest up, giving thumbs up. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The image is partially obscured by a white curved line at the top.

And when they come together...

The parent is trying to steer the ship. The teen is trying to jump overboard and swim away.

The surface argument isn't really the issue. It's deeper: autonomy vs. safety.

You see the quick reactions, clipped tones, an eyebrow raised like it's carrying history.

A group of diverse people, including a woman and two men, are shown from the chest up, giving thumbs up. They are smiling and looking towards the camera. The image is partially obscured by a white curved line at the top.

And when they come together...

The teen flares, the parent stiffens, then both retreat and advance, each trying to be heard.

Sentences get interrupted, meanings get assumed, and the emotions override the words.

For you, the RJ facilitator, this is an opportunity to make a meaningful impact.

What's
going on
inside the
teen?

**Independence
vs. being
tethered to
the family
orbit.**

**A parent's
guidance feels
more like a
verdict or
judgment.**

**They have an
urge to
reclaim
control.**

**Even when
the issue is
small, the
feeling is
large.**



What's going on inside the parent?

Love braided with worry.

Their instinct leans toward protection.

Words sharpen and clarity narrows.

**Logic says “teach”;
the nervous system says
“shield.”**

**They are embarrassed by
their child's
behavior.**

**They are no longer
in control of what
happens next.**



And inside the relationship...

Both are speaking from the part of themselves that feels threatened.

The parent interprets pushback as disrespect.

The teen interprets limits as mistrust.

Where can
we make a
difference
with the
parent?

- **Intake & Pre-conference**
 - By Observing the Relationship
 - Preparing the Parent for RJ
 - What is the goal?
 - What are the youth's goals?
 - Private Conversations
 - Outside Referrals

Where can
we make a
difference
with the
parent?

Repairs

- Having a Role for the Parent
- Addressing Reconciling and Lack of Trust
- Skill Building Exercises
 - Formal or Informal

Where can
we make a
difference
with the
parent?


- **Reintegration**
(A Core RJ Principle)
 - At Program Completion
 - Celebrate and Acknowledge the Growth
 - Evaluating the Parent/Youth Relationship Going Forward
 - Is Trust Restored or What Will it Take?

Why should they care?

Power struggles are exhausting



They inhibit parents and youth from connecting relationally



They encourage more and more distance and dysfunctional behaviors



They have long-term consequences, long after the teenage years

Tools and Info to Share with Parents – What works!

More listening, less lecturing

Don't you want to know who your child is becoming?

Set realistic boundaries and expectations

When they feel involved, they are more likely to follow the plan.

Picking and choosing your battles

Developing life skills requires making choices on their own. Find choices that are empowering and less risky.

Acknowledging their perspective

Their problems seem big because their perspective (years of experience) is small.

Model the behavior you want to see in them

Are you calm and respectful with them?

How to get out of a power struggle?

- **Begin by stating expectations in a calm manner.**
- **Move on to saying something like:**
 - **“We can revisit this later when we are both calm.”**
- **This plan of action means they really have to revisit this conversation and include their youth in the discussion.**

How to get out of a power struggle?

- **Other statements that help set boundaries:**
 - **“I hear what you’re saying, but I’m comfortable with my decision.”**
 - **“Let me get back to you on that.”**
 - **“I’m not comfortable discussing that right now.”**
 - **“I can see this matters to you.”**

How to get out of a power struggle?

- **When you re-start the conversation?**
 - **“I want to hear your view.”**
 - **“Here is what I am hearing.”**
 - **“You make a fair point.”**
 - **“What would help right now?”**

How to get out of a power struggle?

- **When a parent acknowledges the youth's feelings without agreeing to their demands, it takes the heat out of the moment.**
- **They're not feeding the drama. They're grounding it.**
- **They can show understanding without surrendering their boundaries.**



Ask:
Can you
really
control
anyone?

- **Whatever their youth does, they are making a choice to do so.**
- **Shift from control to discussions about expectations, boundaries and consequences.**

The real truth.

- **Parents are playing a lose-lose game when they are in a power struggle.**
- **As the adult, they are saddled with all the responsibilities, and the youth isn't.**
- **The reality is that the youth is not thinking about their future, while defying their parent.**
- **Only the parent is.**

Two Ways to Avoid Power Struggles

- **Strategy: Two Choices**
 - Give them two choices within a framework you set.
 - For example, rather than demanding they do their homework immediately, ask if they prefer to do it before dinner or after.
 - They feel empowered, while the parent still maintains authority.
- **Strategy: The “Have To”**
 - By outlining essential, non-negotiable tasks – such as homework, the parent establishes boundaries that youth learn to respect.
 - This strategy must also have negotiable tasks – like when to go to bed on the weekends.

Where can we make a difference with the youth?

Privately, encourage the youth to talk about their needs and feelings.

- **Encourage them to pause and breathe before reacting to their parent.**
- **Encourage them to offer a thread of responsibility: “I can show you I’ve thought this through.”**

The real truth is: a conversation instead of an argument is the goal. It is about understanding, not winning.



Resources

<https://www.precisionfamilytherapy.com/post/addressing-power-struggles-between-parents-and-teens>

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-and-empowerment/201902/the-power-struggle-is-real-forging-harmony-with-your-teen>

<https://begintalking.com/parenting-my-teen-staying-out-of-the-power-struggle/>