


➤ All there is to know about power struggles



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➤ Well not really

- ▣ But we can start with a definition

➤ What it is


- ▣ When a **student** refuses to comply with a teacher's direction/request **and the teacher** continues to engage the student, a power struggle is the result.
- ▣ Any situation has the potential to become a power struggle.
- ▣ It can occur with an academic request, a behavioral request, a request that involves a transition

It takes two for a power struggle

The power struggle

- ❑ In a power struggle each participant is **committed to winning**
- ❑ Power struggles can only continue if **both parties** choose to stay involved
- ❑ The goal in the struggle is not about solving a problem – being the **winner** becomes the goal
- ❑ In reality, there are no winners
- ❑ But there are **losers**

Why only losers?



Winning is a myth.
Once we fight, everyone loses.

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Why only losers?

- ❑ If the **adult** "wins" the struggle:
 - ❑ The student decides it is the adult's power that defeated him.
 - ❑ He believes in the **value of power**
 - ❑ He will work harder and harder to **gain power**, striking back in subsequent situations with stronger and stronger methods.

Why only losers?

- ▣ If student "wins" and gets what he wants:
 - ▣ He is assured that **his power resulted in the victory.**
 - ▣ He is confident that the adult lost due to the **power of the student**

Reaction options for when the student is the "loser"

- ▣ A student who is overpowered may react by either **fight** or **flight**

Students who choose **flight**

- ▣ Let others make all decisions for him/her – not a good habit to develop if your goal is for the student to become a successful, happy, contributing member of society.

Students who choose fight

May seek power through rebellious and destructive behavior. Students who feel powerless in their lives may find getting **revenge** is a way to gain power

- ☑ Revenge starts as a way to hurt others but over time revenge ultimately hurts the student himself
- ☑ As students become teenagers and young adults, revenge may look like drug and alcohol abuse, pregnancy, running away and suicide.

What challenging behavior can look like

- ☑ Any of the following
 - ☑ Non-compliance
 - ☑ Physical aggression
 - ☑ Verbal aggression
 - ☑ Self-injury
 - ☑ Self-Stimulation/Unregulated
 - ☑ Property destruction
 - ☑ Sexual assault

Causes of challenging behavior for ASD..... putting you and the student on the slippery slope to a power struggle

- ☑ Wanting something they can't have (for students with an autism spectrum disorder the **obsessions with an area of interest** makes it so difficult to move away from it)
- ☑ Seeking social attention but with a lack of **social awareness**, students may become targets of school bullies. Low self-esteem caused by being rejected and outcast by peers often makes these teens even more susceptible to "acting-out" behaviors at home and school.

Causes of challenging behavior

Sensory problems (noises, strong smells, bright lights) Students with sensory sensitivities often become stressed or anxious and a **sensory overload** may result with "shut down"

Change in routine (for ASD it is the routine that gives them a sense of control)

Overwhelmed by **high expectations** that are taxing

Overcome by **complex activities** without a legitimate way to "take a break"

All of which can give a student the feeling that

- They have **no control or power** over any part of their lives

So what's the deal with power anyway? Why worry about who has it and who doesn't?

- A sense of power is a **basic** social and emotional need
- Power gives us all a sense of **self esteem**
- We are comfortable knowing we have some **control** over at least some parts of our lives

Why typical behavior management techniques may not work

- ❑ Babies and toddlers see themselves as the center of the universe
- ❑ Typical development results in a child realizing that other people have needs and wants that conflict with their own.
- ❑ As children grow they learn to balance other people's needs with their own


However....

Why typical behavior management techniques may not work


- ❑ Children on the spectrum often have great difficulty with seeing the world from another's perspective (**Theory of Mind**)
- ❑ Responding to behaviors with praise or feelings of guilt may not be effective as the child does not understand the adult's perspective and so approval is not important
- ❑ Promise of future rewards for appropriate behavior (screen time at the end of the day) may not work because many children on the spectrum **live only in the present**

The bottom line.....


- ❑ Characteristics of children on the spectrum make them particularly **vulnerable** to using power struggles as a way to meet their needs
- ❑ When we work with a student who is out of control we often put all of our effort into **regaining** control
- ❑ Two parties looking for control often results in a power struggle with all of it's negative and dangerous outcomes

 What the student needs

- ▣ Students are looking for **control, respect and belonging**.
- ▣ As we all know, control, respect and belonging often seem **unattainable** for students on the spectrum.

 What the adults need

- ▣ Adults feel the need to **defend** their control, authority or credibility and often may react to personal button pushing

 And so it begins....

- ▣ The needs of the adult and the student are in **direct conflict** with each other.
- ▣ It's fight or flight time

How the power struggle ignites



- ❑ You make a request that the student doesn't want to comply with, and the student may throw out a **hook**.

The Hook

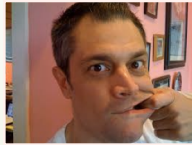
- ❑ A hook is a statement that **shifts** the focus of the interaction to the student's agenda (not doing what was asked).
- ❑ It is often explosive and can make the teacher want to defend herself and to express her anger
 - ❑ I hate you
 - ❑ You are the worst teacher I've ever had
 - ❑ This is a stupid assignment
 - ❑ Or worse – the response becomes physical with the student striking out or throwing

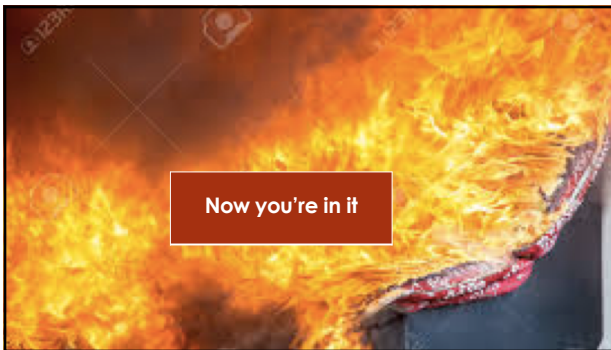
Do not respond to the hook!

- ❑ Once you respond to the hook, the agenda has changed and you will most likely move into a power struggle.
- ❑ The hook is **not the point** – don't play into it

Hook

- ❑ If the student grabs you with a hook, the interaction is no longer about the noncompliance.
- ❑ The student has successfully **changed the focus** of the conversation.

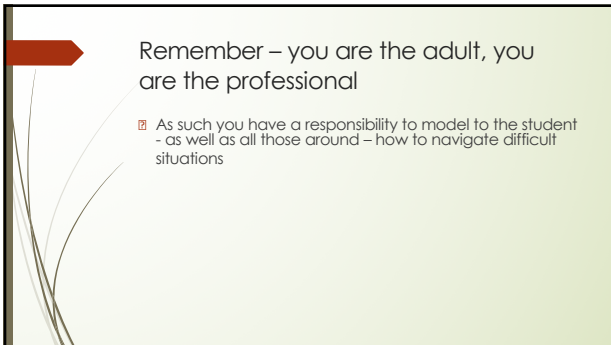


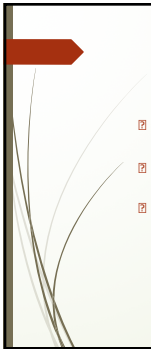


Now you're in it

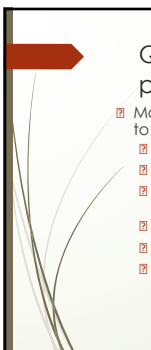
Remember – you are the adult, you are the professional

- ❑ As such you have a responsibility to model to the student - as well as all those around – how to navigate difficult situations



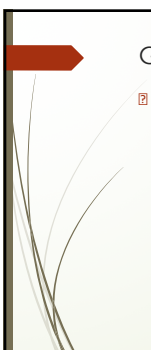


- ❑ Once you find yourself in a power struggle, you will need to defuse the situation.
- ❑ You may feel attacked, threatened or disrespected, so take steps to calm down before doing anything
- ❑ Taking a deeper than normal breath and releasing it slowly will help you clear your mind, and give you a moment to plan an appropriate response



Quickly start the problem solving process

- ❑ Make an educated guess as to why the student is refusing to comply – what is the function of the behavior
 - ❑ Cognitive ability
 - ❑ Sensory
 - ❑ Does not know how to ask for help, or is intimidated to ask for help
 - ❑ Has trouble getting started on work
 - ❑ Doesn't understand how to do the work
- ❑ If the student waits long enough, he will not need to comply (maybe there is a history of this strategy working)



Goals to keep in mind

- ❑ As you work to defuse the power struggle remember to:
 - ❑ Preserve the **dignity** of the student
 - ❑ Take full advantage of a **powerful teaching moment**

Remember – words are only part of the communicative message


- Types of communication
 - Rational communication:** focuses on words and their logical contexts
 - Primitive communication:** focuses on territory, body language, and voice inflection

Your message

- As people become defensive, they may rely more on **primitive** communication
- As such, attention must be paid to the components of primitive communication
 - Paralanguage
 - Kinesics


Paralanguage

- The nonverbal components of speech
 - Tempo
 - Pitch
 - Volume




Tempo

- ❑ Insert a very brief "wait time" before each response to the student to slow the conversation down



Pitch

- ❑ Be aware of the pitch of your voice – the perception of "calm" indicates to the student that you are in control of yourself



Volume

- ❑ Volume control is essential – teachers often feel the need to raise their voice in a power struggle in order to dominate the conversation
- ❑ Raising your voice may be seen by the student as an invitation for the student to do the same
- ❑ Raising your voice indicates that you are in the same place as the student – about to lose control

Kinesics

- Messages that are transmitted through body posture and motion:
 - facial expressions
 - gestures
 - movements
 - postures

Body Language

- Make sure you are not standing over the student – make every effort to be at eye level
- Be aware of the negative message your body may be sending – hands on hips, leaning forward
- When engaged in a power struggle, we often mirror the posturing of the other – fueling the hostility

Power of primitive language

- When there is a discrepancy between body language and the words being spoken, we tend to trust body action to reveal authentic feelings

Make it private

- ▣ If the power struggle begins publicly, make every attempt to quickly move it so that it becomes a private interaction
- ▣ A public stage puts the student into a position where he must defend his image
- ▣ A public stage puts the teacher in the position in which you feel you need to demonstrate your power

Using the fewest possible words is best

- ▣ Less likelihood of misinterpretation
- ▣ Less opportunity for the student to ignore you or the respond with an inappropriate remark (another hook!)

Once in private

- ▣ Explain which behavior was inappropriate
- ▣ Explain why the behavior was inappropriate
- ▣ Give the consequence
- ▣ Set up a time to problem solve with the student and to develop a plan of action
- ▣ Remember – you do not need to have the last word

When you meet with the student


- ☑ The words you use (and choose not to use) will help to determine the success of the interaction
- ☑ Avoid trigger words
 - ☑ You, no, don't why
- ☑ Avoid trigger statements
 - ☑ I know you can do it if you just try
 - ☑ You know how to do that work – you've done it before
 - ☑ Just because you don't want to do it, is not a good reason

Humor


- ☑ When possible and appropriate, use humor as a way to help the student relax and to become a participant in the problem solving effort.
- ☑ Humor is effective – sarcasm must be avoided

Sarcasm isn't funny


- ☑ Sarcasm has no place when problem solving with a struggling student. A student who does not feel in control may not understand the subtleties of sarcasm. What you say as a joke may be misconstrued by the student as an insult.

 Problem solving with the student


- ▣ If possible, give the student some choice in work requirements
- ▣ Remember the student may attempt to engage in a new power struggle in an effort to grab some control – give them the opportunity to have legitimate control
- ▣ If the student makes a negative comment, remember what you know about the hook. Don't take the bait!

 Time, Time, Time


- ▣ Recovering from a power struggles takes time. The student may have been practicing this pattern of behaviors for years – and it may work in some environments.

 So our goal needs to be to make a change


- ▣ A change that will **reduce** adult - student conflict;
...that gives your student **legitimate power** (control)
...that will **increase** the likelihood that your student will be a success - at home, at school, and in life.

 Avoiding power struggles


- ▣ Wouldn't that be nice.....

 How students may try to avoid

- ▣ Students may attempt to avoid power struggles through **manipulation** – a way to get what you want without actually controlling the situation.


 Manipulation

- ▣ All students manipulate their teachers (and parents). It's part of their normal routine. They learn to use their charms and strengths to get their way and negotiate more power.




Manipulation: From charming to dangerous

- ❑ The problem with manipulation occurs when students use behavioral threats to manipulate you.
- ❑ The manipulation becomes a power and control game for the child, and that's where it gets dangerous.
- ❑ In this type of manipulation, the student is telling you, "Give me what I want or else."
- ❑ In other words, "If I don't get what I want, you and everyone around will pay the price."



Maybe try something else

- ❑ Keep in mind that beneath every manipulative demand lies a legitimate request by the student.
- ❑ But the request is not the most important issue – instead it is the manipulative behavior the student is using to meet the need that is the real issue.
- ❑ So, let's teach a replacement behavior for manipulation




How about this


- ❑ Teach the student to engage in a **mutual** discussion and arrangement of terms concluding in a transaction or agreement

 In other words, teach the art of negotiation

- ❑ What negotiation is not
 - ❑ Wheeling and dealing
 - ❑ Allowing winners and losers
 - ❑ Adversarial

 What it is – The essence of negotiation

- ❑ A valuable and necessary life skill
- ❑ Teaches empathy and compromise
- ❑ Teaches fairness and understanding
- ❑ Teaches the importance of walking in other person's shoes
- ❑ Allows favorable outcomes for all

 Power of Negotiation

- ❑ Negotiation is a tool that gives a student legitimate power – it is not longer necessary to attempt to grab control with inappropriate behavior.
- ❑ When an adult engages in negotiation with a student she is respecting and acknowledging the student's power and independence
- ❑ Negotiation teaches a student to advocate for themselves.

But wait...there's more

- ▣ Negotiation teaches the use of proposals and compromises
- ▣ Negotiation allows for a gradual gain in power for the student
- ▣ Negotiation is a powerful problem solving skill that centers around fairness for all involved

At it's best.....

- ▣ Negotiation appropriately empowers students to navigate independently in the adult world

How it works

- ▣ Ground rules
 - ▣ The adult decides what is negotiable and what is non negotiable
 - ▣ Rules of negotiation are clear and used consistently
 - ▣ In order for a student to understand the value and power of negotiation there will need to be a reinforcement plan
- ▣ Each negotiation transaction must involve a compromise
- ▣ Re-negotiation is always on the table but can be allowed only when the previous agreement has been fulfilled

Reinforcement plan


- As you begin teaching negotiation skills you may want to make the reinforcer something highly valued, readily available upon earning, and only available in the negotiation process.

Negotiation

- Scenario
 - Student is handed a work sheet with 20 problems
 - Refuses the work
 - Teacher suggest negotiation
 - Student refuses
 - Student request negotiation (reinforcement is given when student asks to negotiate)
 - Student requests doing 1 problem; teacher negotiates 15 problems
 - Student does 1 problem (reinforcement given for completing the problem)
 - Student requests to re-negotiate (reinforcement given)
 - Student requests doing 1 problem, teacher negotiates 12 problems

Negotiation


- Scenario
 - Student is asked to put away supplies used during activity
 - Student refuses
 - Student asks to negotiate (reinforcement)
 - Student requests throwing away trash; teacher requests throwing away trash, putting books back, putting crayons away
 - Student throws away trash and asks to renegotiate (reinforcement for throwing away trash and for asking to renegotiate)

 Scenario – teaching the students to tell you his needs

- ▣ Student is on a reinforcement break on the swing when the timer goes signaling the break is “all done”
- ▣ As you hold the swing for the student to jump off, he attempts to hit you.
- ▣ Engage in a mutual discussion by handing him his communication device and model negotiation by prompting him to request more.


 Time Lost – but with a good return

- ▣ Negotiation takes time away from the task at hand but.....
- ▣ Gives repeated (and often mass) practice of a skill that is so hard for many students on the spectrum to master.
 - ▣ Compromise
 - ▣ Taking into account another person's agenda
 - ▣ Repeated initiation of a communicative effort

 And maybe most importantly

- ▣ Negotiation helps to decrease power struggles which stop all learning and often damage the student's reputation around peers and adults

It's a dance.....



Resources

- ▣ <https://www.quism-meltdowns.com>
- ▣ mbhuiten@gmail.com
- ▣ <https://www.mvaspererstein.com>
- ▣ <https://www.empoweringparents.com/article/masters-of-manipulation-how-kids-control-you-with-behavior/>
- ▣ <https://www.mvaspererstein.com>
- ▣ <https://www.crisisprevention.com/>
