



The Cornell Research Program  
on *Self-Injury and Recovery*

## Dealing with Power Struggles

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Power struggles with parents and adults in authority are a normal part of adolescent development since it is during this time of life that young people are beginning to express independence and autonomy. They are thus more willing to question authority – especially their parents'. These struggles can be worsened by charged issues like self-injury. The fear and control issues that surround self-injury can create very tense situations for both the adult/parent *and* child. While it is virtually impossible to avoid all power struggles, adults can minimize them by staying aware of a few basic principles.

### **How do you know when a power struggle is happening?**

A power struggle begins when your child refuses to do something you ask, follow a rule you have set, or participate in activities in which he or she is expected to join. Many times the resistance has less to do with the specific request and more to do with simply wanting to exercise control or power. It is VERY easy to take the bait as parents or other concerned adults particularly when what we believe we are asking is reasonable or has already been agreed upon. Doing what you can to *not* engage in a power struggle is the very best way to avoid one.

### **Strategy 1: Disengage early**

The best way to avoid an argumentative power struggle is to simply not engage in one. The moment you realize that the struggle is starting is the moment to begin disengaging. This is not about giving in, but it is about taking the space to figure out how to deal with the resistance while you are calm and not feeling a lot of strong emotions. If your young person is becoming argumentative, it helps to keep your tone and voice calm and even. If you feel your emotions starting to rise, work on acknowledging and accept your feelings without reacting impulsively. Remember: *you have time*. In most cases, you can revisit things later. You can also let your young person vent or exhaust their negative feelings without reacting in-kind. Let your young person know that you are not ignoring him or her, but that you are just listening and want to take time to think about it all. Remember, it takes two to fight; you can simply decide that you will not participate!

### **Strategy 2: Create win-win situations**

When you are calm, try asking yourself what could allow you both to get something you want from the situation. What do you see as the non-negotiable points in the situation and what are the areas in which you would be willing to compromise in order to get what is really important to you? Be clear with yourself and then, when you are ready, talk with your young person. Giving him/her options for achieving what he/she wants while also being clear about what is important to you can provide a workable middle ground in which everyone achieves something they want. If a young person can choose between options for when and how their obligations are met, he or she has more autonomy and decision-making abilities within a framework you have identified as acceptable.

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## Strategy 3: Collaboration

Try thinking of your young person as a partner in the negotiation process. It is really helpful if you create opportunities to have conversations about what is important to each of you *during a time in which you are both calm and able to have a conversation*. The goal of these conversations can be to come to agreements about expectations, needs, and consequences if expectations are not met. This could be specific to self-injurious behavior such as expectations about self-injury practices and tools, or it could relate to other issues likely to trigger intense emotion for parent or child. Having clear, *agreed-upon* consequences for not meeting a responsibility can also help circumvent an argumentative power struggle, or at least help to guide next steps when consequences become necessary. Consider using “positive consequences” (e.g. helping others or doing other forms of service) as an alternative to taking things away or restricting freedom. Positive consequences can help build needed skills and engender positive feelings between adults and young people. Referring to these consequences at the start of a power struggle, reminding your young person that he or she took part in defining them, and consistently holding him/her accountable for their actions can help stop or at least more quickly calm a power struggle.

## Strategy 4: Patience and persistence

Keep in mind that these kinds of struggles are normal, and are actually a sign of a child’s healthy development. Figuring out how to make room for a child’s developing autonomy, independence, and limit-testing in a way that does not create conflict is something you can work on together. There will likely be moments when you feel like you are failing or when it seems like no matter how reasonable you are your child will take the path of *most* rather than least of resistance. The task (and opportunity!) for adults in these moments is to practice mindfulness and to trust the role that time and experience plays in helping young people mature. Slowing down, observing without doing, detaching from an immediate outcome, knowing you have time, and then taking the time you need to calmly assess the best course of action are all very useful skills. They are also useful for your child - who is learning by watching you - in developing skills for dealing with stress, conflict, and intense negative feelings.

## Strategy 5: Gratitude

Power struggles pose unique challenges for adults working with youth who self-injure or who are in recovery for self-injury. The fear that natural boundary-setting may contribute to acting out by self-injuring is common and generates confusing and difficult feelings. Remember to acknowledge yourself and your young person for getting through hard situations with *any* grace. Every little reminder of a job well done is good for everyone - even if it is not a job done perfectly.

### SUGGESTED CITATION

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