

ParentBrief



Powerless Parenting

Imagine this scenario. Your child has been invited to a friend's for a play day. The friend's mother has suggested your child bring her bike, as her child will have hers and together the girls can ride in the park opposite the house. You know that helmets are mandatory, so you pack it and drive child, bike, helmet and a healthy afternoon tea to the friend's home. When you arrive, your child's friend is already on her bike ready to go across the road to the park. She is not wearing a helmet. You ask the friend's parent why and her response is "I can't always get her to put one on.... it always ends in her throwing a hissy fit..."

Exercising your authority

It's pretty clear from the above scenario who wields the power in this family. You're no doubt shocked that a parent lets their child get away with not wearing a helmet, when this is a legality. Just because the kids are riding in the park and not on the road is no excuse for not exercising safety precautions and abiding by the rules. You're probably wondering whether you even want your child to have a play day with this family. You turn to your child, who already has her helmet in place, praise her for doing so, and suggest to her friend to do the same. At this point, the ball is well and truly back in the court of the other parent, and you're left wondering what will happen next.

I want my kids to like me

For a variety of reasons, some parents today feel helpless to influence their children's behaviour. When children are younger, some parents feel uncomfortable and anxious about exercising their authority because they know that if they do, their kids will get upset and angry and may reject them. As a society, we are more tolerant of excess and less tolerant of authority today than previous generations. There seem to be fewer role models in the public eye today who are prepared to advocate that it's OK to say 'NO' to your kids and mean it.

Empowered or Overpowered

Strong-willed kids can be pretty smart when it comes to challenging and abusing the implicit authority of their parents. About the age of two, most kids push the autonomy button. The minute they feel challenged a battle of wills begins that can last through childhood and into teenage years. When parents react by overpowering their child, the child is likely to feel powerless and either give in or fight back to regain control, often through destructive or negative behaviours. Unless we, as parents, effectively and positively deal with power struggles from the beginning, kids will quickly learn to take control themselves.

Firm parenting brings out the best

- **Control vs influence.** Parental discipline is not a matter of always getting our own way. Persuading our kids to live within our rules and values is preferable to insisting things must be as we want them to be.
- **Decide which battles are worth it.** Accept that you will win some, lose some, compromise when needed, and let the small stuff go.
- **Give your kids practise at being powerful in useful and appropriate ways.** Put them in charge of particular chores, encourage age-appropriate independence.
- **Offer acceptable and reasonable choices.** Rather than narrowing down the choice to only this or that, keep choices open but reasonable. An alternative choice should never be a punishment.
- **No is often an invitation** on the child's part for us, as parents, to enter into the power struggle. Distraction, negotiation and side-stepping the issue, can provide the circuit breaker needed to work on the underlying reason for 'no'.
- **Work towards a win-win.** This is probably easier when a child is older and can see the value of negotiation. But even small children can get the idea that yes, they can do this, and you can also do that, and everything will be OK. There doesn't have to be a winner or a loser.