Power Struggles and Your Preschool Child

What is happening with your three or four year old and new power struggles?
Every stage of development brings new joys and challenges. Just as the ‘terrible two’s’ and its ever present ‘no’ leads to future independence, and the repetitive fill and dump activity of younger children equates to competence (“I am the master of these things; look how I can move them”) your preschool child is busy experimenting with behavior that will help them gain skills and knowledge.
As your child nears their third year they begin a new stage, one that can often surprise parents and caregivers with its tenacity. While this stage can be trying at times, your child is busy working on important skills regarding power. They are eager to know what power is, who has it, when and how it is used and where you get it.
As this stage begins, children definitely recognize power as “Look at what that person can make happen!” and very much want that power for themselves. While they sort through the what, where, when and how’s of power, some of their behavior can be surprising. Being prepared by knowing both what these behaviors are and what you can do when these behaviors arise will allow you to support your child through this period (and later when they revisit these behaviors). This also gives you a chest of tools to draw from.
You can identify that your child is working through and interested in power when they begin to:

1) Negotiate frequently and with great conviction

2) Adamantly refuse – often for benign requests like putting on a jacket before going out into the cold or washing hands after using the bathroom

3) Ignore/not listen – even if, or sometimes especially, when a person is close by or directly in front of them

4) Display strong emotions/tantrums such as yelling when you start to help them with a jacket, as if they were exasperated with the idea they need help, but not much later deeply crying and demanding help with their jacket saying they cannot do it by themselves

5) Refuse to move, or conversely, attempt to run ahead or away from the adult they are with

6) Push past limits and boundaries and/or test limits and boundaries frequently
How do these behaviors connect to the child’s interest in defining and acquiring power?

• Simply, these actions feel powerful to your young child.
• Negotiating, giving input and in their eyes, hopefully directing situation feels powerful (Just like Mom, Dad, my teacher, Grandma, Auntie I made/helped shape a decision)
• Refusing to cooperate or listen and ignoring requests, especially when they cause someone to grow flustered, frustrated or emotional feels powerful (Look at how I made Mom/Dad/sibling/friend turn red in the face/raise their voice!)
• Screaming, hitting and tantrums also feel powerful as those behaviors can almost always stop whatever is going on and draw attention (I made everything stop/ made that adult come over right away)
• Pushing past and testing limits and boundaries feels powerful (I’m deciding)

Your preschool child is experimenting and trying to root power out through these behaviors, sometimes discovering what power is by what it is not (ex: power is not hitting/yelling-it will not get what I want)
There are messages and strategies that parents and caregivers may find helpful during this time. These messages and strategies will support and reassure your child in what can often be a time of rollercoaster emotions. They will also help shape your child’s sense of power in a positive way.
Messages and strategies, which can be delivered with patience and kindness, are:

1) **Focus on the positive** – whatever is most focused on will grow. Examples: “You got your jacket on right away!” “I like how you took a deep breath and used a calm voice!” or “Good remembering to ask for help!”
2) Be consistent with limits and boundaries - this reassures your child and gives them a trusted and solid base to count on
3) Frame situations and experiences, especially exceptions - for example, “I can tell you are frustrated that I tried to help with your jacket. You can use a calm voice and tell me you want to do it by yourself” or “When you hit, I feel worried because I need to know everyone is safe here. Next time you are angry, use words and ask for help.”
4) Curtail emotional responses and be frank, respectful and practical. When a child is obviously testing or pushing past limits, remind them in a clear, patient and calm tone of voice that their actions have consequences. Then follow through consistently with those consequences.
5) Be prepared for strong emotions/meltdowns and have a plan for how or if you will react to those emotions/meltdowns
6) Allow natural consequences to occur and support him/her through disappointment, anger or sadness. 

- For example, if you were going to the park but your child refused to use the bathroom before heading there (because not listening and refusing feels powerful to them), you could talk about how you will leave when he or she is finished with the bathroom. If they do not take a turn in the bathroom, you could talk about the consequences that might occur, like having a smaller amount of time at the park given how long they are choosing to take to use the bathroom. If/when they park visit happens with a shorter visit and the child is upset, give her/him the opportunity to experience those sad, frustrated or disappointed feelings. You might say, “It may have seemed like a good idea to not use the bathroom, but you found out you didn’t like how that shortened our park visit. What could you do differently next time so that you have a longer visit at the park?”
7) Resist the temptation to shield children from uncomfortable emotions like anger, sadness, disappointment and frustration — we all must learn to deal with uncomfortable emotions. While it may be difficult, parents and trusted caregivers are the child’s best support in learning to handle these emotions in healthy and appropriate ways.
8) Give the option to choose/be in control when appropriate, but make sure all the choices are acceptable for the adult – for example you might say,

“Would you like to help decide what we are going to have for dinner tonight? Should it be chicken rice or spaghetti?” or “Do you want to use the bathroom in 5 or 10 minutes?” Also be prepared for times when the child will want to make a decision, is not be able to and frame that for them,

“Sometimes you can choose, but not this time. Tonight I need to decide what we are having for dinner.” or “Sometimes it is a choice when to use the bathroom, but right now it is not. I need you to use the bathroom right away so we can head out to the car for our trip.”
These messages and strategies offer support and reassure your child by giving them consistent limits and natural consequences during what can be an especially emotional period of development. While you may not hear “Thanks!” your child’s gratitude will shine through in many ways, and their sense of what power is, and how it can be used, will be shaped and influenced in a healthy manner.

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