

Successfully Negotiating a Power Struggle

1. Do not manufacture power struggles by the way you teach.

By and large power struggles are a result of a student's attempt to satisfy an unmet need. Students who feel a sense of power and control, are making progress toward their goals, are supported by the teacher, have avenues to share concerns, and are given choices and not backed into corners by harsh directives will be much less likely to feel the need to engage the teacher in a power struggle.

2. Avoid being “hooked in” by the student.

If the student tries to hook you in by making you feel guilty or responsible for their inappropriate behavior, simply ignore the hook and give the responsibility back to the student. If you become drawn in on a personal level, the student is then in control.

3. Move into a private (and out of a public) encounter.

If the encounter begins publicly, quickly move it into a private, one-to-one interaction. A public stage will put the student in a position where they must defend their image, and put you in a position that you feel the need to demonstrate your power.

4. Calmly acknowledge the power struggle.

It is counterproductive to show anger or to “flex your muscle.” Instead, with a calm voice, acknowledge to the student that things appear to be heading toward a power struggle, which would surely make any eventual outcome worse. Ask the student to consider how the situation could end up in a “win-win” scenario.

5. Validate the student's feelings and concerns.

Use phrases such as, “I understand that you feel the way you do, but that does not mean that it excuses what you did,” “Those feelings make sense, I can see why you think that, but . . .” Feelings are important and valued, but they are beside the point.

6. Keep the focus on the student's choice, and simply state the consequence (repeating if necessary).

No matter what “hook” the student tries to use, keep the focus on the fact that the student made a choice to violate the rule/social contract (i.e., “I understand that you feel this is unfair, but you made the choice to ____ and the consequence we decided on for that is ____.”) They chose to act in the way they did, and therefore they need to accept responsibility. If the student does not want to accept the logical or agreed upon consequence, then they can make the choice to accept a more significant consequence, such as losing the opportunity to be part of the class/activity.

7. Put your emotional energy into constructive matters.

After you have successfully communicated to the student their choices, it is not useful to dwell on this student's behavior. Shift your attention back into your teaching. Model constructive, rational, positive behavior.