



Avoiding Power Struggles

Adapted August 2017 by Laura O'Rourke, Victoria McMullen, & Meme Hieneman for Home & Community PBS from *Avoiding Power Struggles* by Shane Isley, Kate Marshall, Sara Fefer, & Meme Hieneman (Parenting Special Needs Magazine, 2012, Jul/Aug, pp. 58-59).

While eating dinner, Suzy asks the person she supports, David, to remember to watch his portion control while eating, then leaves the room. When Suzy comes back, she finds that David has eaten 3 turkey sandwiches, leaving his roommates without lunch and giving him more carbohydrates and calories than his doctor recommends. On top of that, David created a huge mess when he added condiments to the sandwiches, and left to go to his room to watch TV. Suzy is furious - how does anyone expect her to get anything done when all she ever does is clean up messes and make new lunches?! Since David is not around, Suzy cleans up the mess by herself. She decides that David needs a consequence for not following directions and causing the mess. She goes into David's bedroom, and lectures him about portion control, diet, being a respectful roommate, and being a responsible person. Although David doesn't understand all of what Suzy is saying, he clearly hears her tone of voice and responds by yelling at her and calling her stupid.

The next day, Suzy asks David to watch his portion control again. This time, David takes his time finishing his morning routine and picks at his food. Suzy reminds him over and over that they need to leave for an appointment, her voice getting louder and louder. Finally, David finishes his breakfast. Suzy is proud of making David follow-through (although he did not clean up his breakfast), but is also frustrated because she didn't get to other things that she wanted to do that morning. As she is reluctantly cleaning up David's breakfast, David goes into the cupboard and eats 4 granola bars, leaving the wrappers in the cupboard. When Suzy finds the wrappers, she charges into the living room, and asks David if he ate the granola bars. He rolls his eyes at her, but does not answer. Suzy tells

herself that David's diet is getting "out of control". She threatens to talk to his family, marches to the phone, and holds it out dramatically to make a call. David tells her that he hates her, that he has his rights, and that she cannot prevent him from eating what he wants. He leaves room and slams the door.

Coercive Process: Power Struggles

The back-and forth power struggle in which Suzy and David are embroiled has been referred to as a "coercive process" (Patterson, 2002). In these situations, people react to one another, upping the ante until problems get much worse or someone finally gives in. This can be particularly challenging with adults who still require support from others in certain areas or have been appointed a guardian to help make decisions on their behalf, given that adults do have rights to make their own decisions. In Suzy and David's case, Suzy resorts to scolding, nagging, and threatening when David does not eat reasonable portions and has difficulty following through to ensure that this occurs. Sometimes Suzy "wins"; that is, when she gets David to comply or is able to follow through with monitoring his food intake. Sometimes David "wins" because he eats unhealthy portions when Suzy isn't looking or otherwise disrupts routines to agitate Suzy. Both participants also lose in these battles. Suzy finds that she is expending effort and time to address problems with David that would be better used elsewhere and David is losing his ability to make healthy food choices independently, which could interfere with his health.

In coercive processes, both people are vying to control the situation and are also frustrated. Frequent coercive interactions can come to define how people

communicate with one another, as well as their relationships in general. Oftentimes, what begins as a small problem escalates and generalizes way beyond the original problem (i.e., from disputes over eating healthy portions to threatening and harsh words). Negative behavior and interactions lead to negative thoughts and assumptions, which lead to additional problems in the future. People involved may come to expect unpleasant communication and therefore avoid one another, or find themselves continually stressed. Over time, there is a breakdown in trust and serious damage to the relationship. Here are some tips that can turn these interactions around and avoid power struggles:

Consider the person's perspective

Make sure the person understands and is involved in all decisions that affect them. In this situation, does David understand why it's important for him to eat differently? Can he be more engaged in developing the plan to stay healthy and his own guidelines... which may involve making different food choices rather than portion control? If not, consider how to do so.

Set the occasion for success.

Make sure that you are available to provide guidance for the person you support and that the environment is set up right. For example, make sure that the food has been distributed among the residents and that other items are not easily accessible before turning your attention elsewhere.

Be specific about your expectations.

Define exactly what you would like the person you support to do. For example, you might show David what 'portion control' means, practice identifying healthy choices, specifically teach how to be share with others and pitch in, and identify the steps to a meal including preparation and clean up. It is sometimes helpful to write down expectations or provide a visual representation to provide a reminder.

Make sure the person can do what is asked.

Before leaving an individual to follow through with expectations, check to see if they are capable of completing them independently. For example, it may be difficult for someone to differentiate between 1 handful vs. ½ cup of food, or which foods are 'healthy' and 'unhealthy', particularly with different diet recommendations (i.e., low fat, low carb, high protein).

Encourage follow through without nagging.

Remain nearby and at least partially available until the expectation is met (and food is gone). If it is necessary to remind the person, try using hints or gestures such as pointing to the pictures of healthy food choices and explain any consequences that may follow.

Focus on rewards, rather than punishment.

Help people reward themselves for success, considering how new skills or behaviors will be self-rewarding. For example, Suzy might talk to David about what he would like to do after he has a 'healthy' day (such as play a video game, ask friends to come over, or go to the antique car show) and point out changes in David's energy or appearance. Make sure to praise!

Catch yourself if the emotions are building.

When you find yourself in middle of a power struggle that is escalating, take a break or just a deep breath to refocus. Simply say, "I am getting frustrated, so I need to calm myself and re-evaluate the plan to be more effective in the future."

Withdraw without feeding into the behavior.

Although you may be withdrawing from the conflict, it is not necessary to give in to demands that may have started the hassle or let the person off the hook. For example, Suzy could maintain the expectation that David only eat his share and clean up after himself, but not escalate to threats will be ineffective or unproductive.

Rely on natural consequences, as appropriate.

If there are natural consequences that make sense, use them. For example, David may need to miss some time with his friends or video games because the doctor has asked to see him more often or engage in more exercise due to weight gain. He may also prefer not to be supervised during eating, which could be reduced as he improves with his portion control.

Coercive interactions tend to occur when expectations are unclear and support providers are under stress. Once conflicts have occurred repeatedly, people often come to anticipate and become poised for problems, which can actually precipitate coercive interactions. When there is time, it is important to plan ahead, create a schedule, and communicate with the person. People also need time to strengthen or rebuild relationships through purely positive activities after conflicts occur.