

If I handed you a rope and told you to use it for tug-o-wars any time you and your child disagree, what would you do? Some of you might agree, take the rope and begin learning the best techniques to ensure victory. Others might tell me you don't have the time or energy to do that and write me off as crazy. Still others would lecture me on the folly of using adult strength as a tool to win arguments. In deeper discussion, some might admit that at one time you could have tried this, but now your child has gotten too big and would claim victory if things came down to brute strength. In the end, most of us would see it as a ridiculous way to work things out – unfair, impractical and way too exhausting.

Now, if I asked you how many times a week you get into a power struggle with your child – arguing and perhaps losing your cool over something you want them to do – would it be easy to count? “I don't want to take a bath... I'm not going... You can't make me... I'm not eating that... I'll pick it up later...” Any of these sound familiar? They're ropes, dangling, just waiting for you – the enforcer – to pick up the other end. You pick up the other end when you get angry.

Another analogy I like to use is that of the Bull and Matador. Every time your child digs in his heels and refuses to comply with your wishes, there is the potential for a show. The tone of voice, the words chosen and the abrasive attitude are all tools the Matador learns to perfect. You 'the bull' can choose to charge the blanket (and the games begin), or not. If you buy into the argument and get angry – you're in. Sometimes, you're there before you even realize what's happening. Other times you make a conscious decision to charge!

Here's the problem... with power struggles – as soon as you agree to participate - you have lost. If you use your parent power to get your way – the child sees your power and wants it. If you decide it's not worth the battle once started and give in – the child feels the power and wants more. Power is an extremely important thing in our society – kids learn that early.

We can't, as parents, stop our kids from wanting that power. We certainly don't want to squash all desire for it out of them by trampling them every time they resist us. We want our kids to be strong, independent and resourceful. They are supposed to use us as a testing ground. To squash all thoughts of power out of them would be counterproductive.

On the other hand we can't let our kids run our home, making all the decisions without regard for societal rules or future consequences. We need to empower them while leading them towards appropriate behavior.

So what can you do? *Use your power for good.* Figure out where you can be more flexible and where you must insist your child follow your lead. Stay in control of the one thing you can – YOU – and work to change the setting from a bullring (or tug-o-war pit) to the family table.

Taking the Bull out of Bullfights

- **Give your child ownership over his/her body;** Most power struggles arise over children's bodies – because it's the one thing they have control over. You can't make a child eat...sleep... or be polite, so you might as well learn other tools.
- **Set healthy boundaries that you are prepared to back up;** Is it morally threatening, life threatening or unhealthy – if not maybe it's a good idea to let them have their way. Think good and hard about where your boundaries come from and why you enforce them.
- **Provide choices;** Allow kids the opportunity to make choices – and accept their choices whenever possible (don't ask their choice when there's only one right answer to you!).
- **Have clear expectations and consequences;** Having clear expectations makes it a lot easier for you not to charge the red blanket just because it's waving. Being clear from the start will help you follow through in a calm, controlled way.
- **Protect your button;** I can think of few things more powerful to a child than feeling like they hold the key to an adult's emotions. Although it can be scary to see someone 'lose it' it's still a powerful feeling to know you can make it happen.
- **Refuse to fight;** If the bull refuses to charge – eventually the Matador will have to lay down the blanket. It isn't fun to play with a bull that simply sits down and waits for you to put on your pajamas.