



FROM CHAOS TO CALM

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How do you avoid power struggles in the classroom?

Avoiding Power Struggles

The classroom is filled with a thousand moving parts. As teachers we deal with conflicts, decisions, feelings, schedules, expectations, and interactions, all while being responsible for creating a safe, secure, and positive learning environment. It can be difficult to avoid ultimatums or power struggles when we are reactive. One huge way that we can work to bring calm to chaos is to focus on being proactive and preventive.

Engagement Over Compliance

When we can let go of the need for students to “comply” with our demands, our expectations, and our directions and instead we can work to “engage” students in the learning, we can move towards a safe, secure, and positive learning environment. As teachers, we are often told to build relationships, and that that will “fix” the dynamic of a chaotic classroom. Building relationships is the key, but what does building relationships mean and look like? It means building trust. We build trust through consistency, predictability, and by following through and honoring the agreements we make throughout the day. A large part of being able to do those things is to develop a mindset that understands that “control” and “compliance” are not the prize, but instead “connection” and “engagement”. We cannot truly force another human, no matter how tiny they are, to do what they do not want to do. Our job as educators is to enlist engagement, create connections and relevance, and honor voice and agreements.

Being Careful in our Communication

Being aware of and able to manage our own communication is key in creating connections and building trust. We communicate through our body language, our tone, and the words we use. What are you communicating in the moments that you feel stressed or anxious? What do your posture, your facial expression, or your gestures communicate to your students in moments of chaos and how are you bringing calm as the adult in the room? What tone are you using when you are giving directions or moving students through their day? What is the volume of your voice or how fast are you speaking? What energy are you bringing and what are you saying?



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Get Curious Not Furious

It can help to manage our own thoughts, feelings, and actions in situations that could lead to power struggles. One of the best ways to enter those situations with a mindset that allows for calm, allows you to disengage from power struggles, and move forward is to not take the behavior of the student personally or get angry, but instead take a moment, take a breath, and seek to understand what the student is trying to communicate

This [video](#) from former educator and speaker Brian Mendler is a great and funny reminder of how we can be the adult in the room.

Strategies to Avoid Power Struggles

1. **Use Positive Phrasing** – When setting limits or giving redirection, flip the phrasing into a positive frame of what can happen if the demand or task is achieved rather than what will happen if it does not. For example, a teacher can say to a student wandering the room “If you don’t return to your seat, I can’t help you” but what does the student most likely hear? I can’t help you. However, if the teacher flips that into “I can help you if you return to your seat.” This gives the student the power to make a choice and the accountability for the consequences. This allows the teacher to remove themselves as the dealer of consequences, but instead just delivering the facts. This can take away the ability of anyone to get into a “power struggle” because the power is in the student’s hands and the consequences are just facts, not arbitrary or up for argument.
2. **Use Controlled Choices** - Allow the student to take part in the decision-making process by offering choices limited by you as the teacher. For example, do you want to do math on the whiteboard or this graph paper? Do you want to work on your reading in the beanbag or under your desk? Using controlled choices, that the teacher is comfortable in honoring, gives the student choices, saves face, and does not eliminate the actual demand. It can provide voice, give space, and build trust.
3. **Accept Approximations** – Recognize and reinforce any attempts to engage in the desired behavior or approximations towards that behavior. For example, if the demand is to complete a worksheet perhaps, I recognize the student’s effort when they



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sit at their desk with pencil in hand. How can I recognize and reinforce that effort to shape towards the work completion?

4. **Use a First/Then** – Chunk the desired task into smaller chunks and reinforce completion with access to a reinforcement following a less preferred activity. For example. First complete either number 3 or 7 and then you can have 2 minutes in the teacher chair. This helps make demands manageable and feasible for the student and gives more timely or immediate reinforcement, making it more likely that the task will get done. The teacher can build on this small success and help the student to increase the time spent on tasks, the number of problems completed, or the stamina for an activity.
5. **Reframe the Request** - Put a positive or creative spin on the original demand. For example, beat the clock, make it a game, use declarative language, or scatter tasks around the room to be discovered rather than given as a demand. This [article](#) by PDA Society has great explanations on common strategies to support refusal. This takes the concept of power or control off the table and helps build trust and ownership.

Resources

Edutopia Article [“Using Curiosity as a way to Defuse Power Struggles”](#)

[PBIS World Avoiding Power Struggles](#)

Autism Classroom Resources article [“5 Ways to Avoid Power Struggles”](#)

The Behavior Code A Practical Guide to Understanding and Teaching the Most Challenging Students Jessica Minahan, Nancy Rappaport MD