

## Let Go of the Rope

We often make the mistake of getting into a power struggle with children. In his insightful book, *It's Not Fair!* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), Anthony Wolf describes how children have a grown up, coping, reasonable side and a tantrum throwing, regressed, "baby-self" which just loves to snare or hook adults into a power struggle. When children regress, it feeds their sense of power to get an adult over-reacting and drawn into a battle. Better, says Wolf, to switch into our "business-like, firm, but detached" parenting or counseling mode and not escalate.

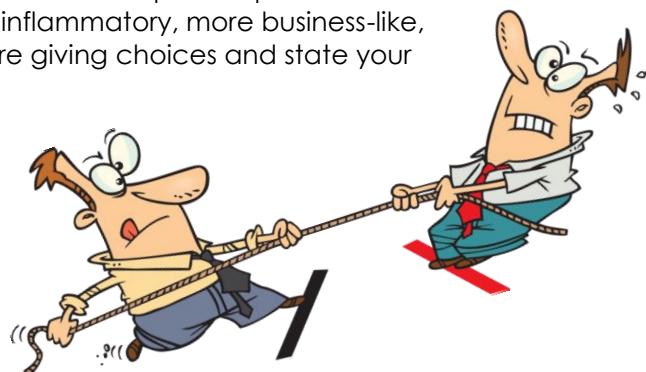
To make this point more visually and forcefully with your team of teachers, use a piece of rope or line in a simple demonstration. Have one person role play cleaning up. When you are asked to help clean up, refuse, saying something provocative that a child might say, like, "I don't have to clean up!" Then throw the rope.

Most adults make the mistake by unconsciously picking up the rope – meaning they begin to escalate with the child, growing angrier, more threatened and therefore more threatening, all to little avail. (The child, meanwhile, is getting a secret rush out of being able to command all this power.) Using the rope as a visual prop will help adults remember to "drop the rope!"

The way to win a "tug-of-war" with a child who is angling for a battle is to drop the rope. What this means in child behavior management terms is moving into a less inflammatory, more business-like, matter-of-fact way of interacting with the child. Two responses are giving choices and state your expectation and detach

**Choices:** Using choices as a strategy offers children a sense of power and a face-saving way to comply. The keys to using choices effectively are:

- make the choices real and reasonable
- offer them in a genuine way out
- be clear about what is not a choice
- stick to the choices you offer
- help the child make a "good choice"



If giving choices does not work, a level two response may be required, such as a time out, giving a consequence for failure or talking with a child in greater depth to determine if some other undetected problem may be playing itself out through the child's misbehavior.

A highlighted second level of response is to "state your expectations and detach." This response is not effective with younger or more impulsive children. However, with a large percentage of children, ages 10 to 15, this technique is very effective. Simply follow the three-point procedure:

1. **state what you expect** clearly, firmly, yet in a calm manner
2. **avoid becoming embroiled** in any arguments, protests or threats
3. **restate what you expect** and leave the young teen to stew in his or her own juices.

Younger, less experienced mentors who command little respect will not be able to use this response, since they don't carry a sense of authority. However, adults who are fair, concerned and respect children and youth can have a lot of success using this method.

From Bob Ditter's "Trail Signs and Compass Points"