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Drawing upon her successful practice and packed with real-life stories, *Parenting Without Power Struggles* is an extraordinary guidebook for transforming the day-to-day lives of busy parents—and the children they love.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Susan Stiffelman is full of heart and soul but firmly grounded in commonsense understanding."

—John Gray, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*

"Susan Stiffelman shows parents how to create healthy, loving relationships with children while helping them develop the resilience and authenticity that will serve them throughout their lives. *Parenting Without Power Struggles* is one of the best parenting books I have ever read." (Arianna Huffington)

"Full of wise insights and effective strategies, this book should be required reading for all parents."

—Harville Hendrix, Ph.D., author of *Giving the Love That Heals: A Guide for Parents*

"If there was ever someone who could truly change the course of a family's life, it's Susan Stiffelman. Her effective methods are spelled out clearly in her wonderful book, making it easy to create a parent-child harmony at home." —Susan Avery, *More* magazine

"Conversational and practical... Stiffelman's engaging work gives parents tools to navigate confidently in both calm and stormy family seas." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Susan Stiffelman, who has double standing to give parenting advice, as a professional therapist and the mother of an exceptional son, has hit the nail on the head twice over...her book is filled with practical, real-world ways to minimize the fights and maximize the love." (Kurt Andersen *novelist and host of public radio's Studio 360*)

#### About the Author

**Susan Stiffelman, MFT**, is a licensed psychotherapist and marriage/family therapist in Malibu, California. A source of advice and support for families around the world, she is AOL's parenting expert (AdviceMama). Visit [ParentingWithoutPowerStruggles.com](http://ParentingWithoutPowerStruggles.com).

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### INTRODUCTION

It probably comes as no surprise that my work with children and parents reflects the truth that *we teach what we most need to learn*. Like many of us growing up in the fifties and sixties (not to mention the thirties and forties, and seventies and eighties), my parents were caring, well intentioned, and fairly clueless about how to raise kids. They did the best they could, shooting from the hip, consulting Dr. Spock, and more or less following whatever conventional parenting wisdom was available in their day and age. The result was a bit iffy.

I love my parents and thank them deeply for all they did to raise me well—which was a lot. (I mean that, Mom!) I'm also aware that if they had been provided with some basic, yet immensely useful information about child rearing, things might have been a whole lot easier for us all. In spite of the fact that I believe one can always make lemonade from lemons, I for one wouldn't have minded growing up with slightly less dysfunction and a stronger connection to my authentic self.

I knew I wanted to work with children from the time I was a child myself, first babysitting, and then working after high school each day at a day care center. I suspect my love for kids evolved not only for the obvious reasons—they're cool, fun, and extremely interesting—but also because, as psychologists recognize, by healing others we can heal ourselves. As I helped children develop confidence, stand up for themselves, or learn to embrace their quirkiness, something in me was also waking up and getting stronger.

While working on getting my teaching credential, I focused on developing ways of teaching children that kept them engaged and reawakened the excitement for learning they were born with; a characteristic that had often been beaten down by the time they'd hit the ripe old age of seven. In my midtwenties I was hired as a private teacher for a family who regularly traveled around the world. With freedom to customize the curriculum for each child, I understood firsthand how passionate children are to learn, when the process is creative and alive.

Eventually, I became a licensed psychotherapist, largely to add credibility to my individual work with children and teens, many with overlapping emotional and academic issues. I seemed to attract a hefty dose of highly creative kids who were quite bright but who often did poorly in school. I also found it interesting that although the majority of the children I worked with had literally everything they could possibly need from a practical and material standpoint, many suffered enormously from depression, anxiety, and a muted sense of aliveness.

One child in particular stands out in my memory to this day. James was the four-year-old younger brother of Aaron, one of the children with whom I was working. Whenever James and his mom arrived to pick up his big brother, I found myself nearly blinded by the light pouring out of him. Talk about joy! James was lit up like a Christmas tree, exuding happiness, curiosity, and exuberance for whatever life had to offer. I saw James again when he was about twelve years old, and my heart sank. He was stooped, sullen, and almost unrecognizable.

I think it was at that moment that I realized I wanted to take all that I'd come to learn as an educator, a therapist, and now a mother, and share it with others. The original title of this book was *Please Don't Let the Light in Your Child's Eyes Grow Dim*, and although I eventually modified it to reflect more of what I wanted to say, that title speaks to the origins of what you are about to read. I believe parents need to act as guardians for their children's innate light, honoring them as the emissaries of joy that they are. Instead, we often find ourselves battling over everything from homework to chores, watching as that light begins to fade.

When I took my fifteen-year-old son on a trip around the world—including a month in Africa—I was staggered by the brightness in the eyes of nearly every child I saw. The impact of that was all the more powerful given the abject poverty and the hardship with which they lived. Although I already knew in my bones that raising children to be joyful had little to do with their parents' bank accounts, the experiences I had in Africa fueled my desire to address what I believe to be the universal truths that allow parents to propel their children forward into adulthood equipped to make their lives fulfilling, joyful, and free of depression, regardless of external circumstances.

In *Parenting Without Power Struggles: Raising Joyful, Resilient Kids While Staying Cool, Calm and Connected*, I've taken all the elements I've gathered along my own teaching, counseling, and parenting journey and assembled them into a body of information that has the power to dramatically improve your parenting life. I start with the concept of how our kids *need* us to be the Captain of the ship in their lives. This isn't about parents' being in control; it's about being *in charge*. You'll learn how to avoid the power struggles that once seemed inevitable when you and your child don't see eye to eye. You'll find out how to find your cool when you've temporarily lost it, regardless of whether your children are cooperating and

behaving as you think they should. And you'll discover how to maintain your confidence even in the midst of those parenting storms that trigger the threats and bribes we deliver when we're feeling anything *but* powerful.

To lay the groundwork for being the Captain of the ship in our children's lives, we'll talk about connection and attachment. When children are deeply and securely attached to us, instincts are awakened that allow them to see us as their North Star and be receptive to our direction. We'll move on to talk about how to help kids when they're feeling frustrated, angry, and aggressive by exploring how to diffuse those intense emotions at their source. By learning how to come *alongside* your kids rather than *at* them, you'll discover you can avoid the power struggles that sometimes make interactions with your children and teens feel like dramatic courtroom battles in which each of you is arguing your case like a high-powered lawyer.

Reading on, you'll learn how to identify and nurture your children's unique gifts and talents, which for some parents may also mean coming to terms with who your children are—and are not—so you can truly accept and celebrate them as they are. Most parents have what I call their “snapshot child”—the ones who say, “Sure, Mom!” the first time they're asked to take out the trash or start doing their homework. Disappointment inevitably arises when the flesh-and-blood child in front of you is radically different from that imaginary one. By coming to see and accept the child you *have*, you free up emotional energy to offer the guidance and parenting he or she uniquely needs and deserves.

Later in the book you'll learn how to help fortify your children and teens with tools to handle the problems, stressors, and challenges of life as they move toward adulthood. And finally, you're going to discover approaches that will help you empower your children to create and manifest their hopes and dreams.

Keep in mind there might be instances where I share an anecdote about one of my clients featuring a child younger or older than yours. These stories will allow you to reflect on previous stages in your parenting life when you started using approaches that may have contributed to challenges you're currently facing. And they'll help you avoid mistakes down the road, as you parent that grade-schooler, tween, or teen—usually much sooner than you expect!

There are many elements in *Parenting Without Power Struggles* that began to take shape decades ago, early in my teaching career. Some ideas developed later as my work with more children in a wider variety of situations helped to further shape my sensibilities. But it wasn't until I became a mother myself that this material was forged in the fires of real life. Everything you read in *Parenting Without Power Struggles* has been used as I've raised my son, who is now eighteen years old. No one has helped inspire me to grow up and be the best version of myself as my son, Ari, has. He is one cool kid. As grateful as I am for my formal education, it's raising this boy that has made everything in this book come to life.

I've made plenty of mistakes. I don't always get it right. Like you, I continue to learn and evolve on this parenthood journey. I've weathered my fair share of storms and have been knocked down more than a few times. But I have a kid who's happy, kind, and incredibly sane, and I think that has at least a little to do with the things you're going to discover as you read this book.

One day, Ari gathered up a book and a blanket and took himself out into the backyard for a good read. As he settled himself, he looked up at me, smiled, and said simply, “I love my life.” That about sums up the goal of this book and of my life as a parent: to have a child who can spontaneously express something so pure and so perfect.

I once read that when we have a child, it's as though our heart steps out of our body and starts walking

around on legs of its own forevermore. The pain, the beauty, the helplessness, and the magnificence of bringing up a child are impossible and overwhelming. Sometimes, we look at our children and can hardly catch our breath. The love we feel for them brings us to our knees as we pray that they will be okay, and that their lives—today, as little ones, and onward toward what we hope will be a very long adulthood—will be blessed.

One of *my* greatest passions is helping children and parents grow into the best versions of themselves they can possibly be. Join me on this journey, and prepare yourself to make today the day that your parenting life gets a lot easier and a whole lot more fun. |Parenting Without Power Struggles

## Chapter

## ONE

### How to Be the Captain of the Ship Through Calm and Stormy Seas

A frightened Captain makes a frightened crew.

—LISTER SINCLAIR

If you're a passenger on a cruise ship, it's kind of cool if the Captain joins you for dinner. But his true value isn't as a social companion; you want and need him to be the guy who oversees the smooth sailing you signed up for, steering the ship through storms or around icebergs while you blithely sing your heart out at the karaoke bar. You want to be able to depend on the Captain, whether or not you like him or understand everything he's doing. It's a hierarchical relationship, with the Captain assuming his rightful role as the one in charge, and the passengers relaxing in the sense of safety that comes from knowing they can rely on someone to competently steer the ship through calm and rough waters.



Many parents believe it's important that their children see them as their friends. But in truth, children need us to be the Captains of their ships. I'm not suggesting parents should be in control of their kids; I'm suggesting they need to be in charge. There's a difference. Control—as I'm using the word—is an attempt to compensate for feeling powerless or afraid. Being in charge means that we're capable of keeping our cool even when the seas are rough—or our kids are pushing our buttons, defying our requests, or melting down.

When our children perceive us as steady and calm—regardless of their moods or behavior—they can relax, knowing they can count on us to get them through the challenging moments of their lives.

Imagine our reaction as passengers if we saw the Captain completely lose his cool upon discovering that his vessel had a leak. Wouldn't our confidence in him take a nosedive if he ran around the deck screaming, "It can't have a leak! This is a state-of-the-art ship! We spent fifty thousand dollars getting it checked before leaving port!"

If our Captain were incapable of dealing with reality, it would significantly undermine our sense of security. If he responded to rough waters by running through the ship, shouting out in panic, "Oh, no! I can't handle this!" we'd be very worried. In the same way, when we refuse to deal with reality as it is—our child's anger toward his sister or our teenager's use of alcohol—we leave him without the sense of comfort that comes from knowing he has someone capable of getting him safely through whatever crisis he might be



experiencing.

WHEN OUR CHILDREN PERCEIVE US AS STEADY AND CALM—REGARDLESS OF THEIR MOODS OR BEHAVIOR—THEY CAN RELAX, KNOWING THEY CAN RELY ON US TO GET THEM THROUGH THE CHALLENGING MOMENTS OF THEIR LIVES.

We want a Captain who anticipates where the rough waters might be, who adjusts his course to avoid bad weather when possible, and who stays cool when things go wrong. If there is a storm, we are far more comforted by a Captain who takes charge, calling out directions to his crew with authority and issuing instructions to the passengers about where to go to stay safe, than we would with one who cowered in a corner or jumped ship. Similarly, when we fully inhabit the role of Captain of the ship of our home and family, we set the stage for providing the quiet and comforting authority that our children so profoundly need.

### **A Simple Model For Understanding Who—if Anyone—Is in Charge**

One of the images I use in my work is that of two hands, with the right one representing you as the parent and the left one representing the child. I'll be referring to this image throughout the book.

In this first image, the right hand is positioned above the left. In this position we get a visual of the natural hierarchy when the parent is in charge.

#### **PARENT IS IN CHARGE**

This image represents you as Captain of the ship. You exude the quiet authority that comes from being certain that you can navigate the ship through calm and stormy seas.

When the hands are side by side, no one is in charge. I call this “The Two Lawyers.” This is where power struggles take place, with each side debating the merits of its position, and the one most committed—or least exhausted—prevailing.

#### **NO ONE IS IN CHARGE: “THE TWO LAWYERS”**

When the left hand, representing the child, is above the right hand, the child is essentially in charge. The parent feels desperate and powerless, and resorts to bribes and threats in an attempt to exert control.

#### **CHILD IS IN CHARGE**

I'll be expanding on this idea throughout the book, but here's a simple scenario that will lay the groundwork for understanding it:

Your daughter asks if she can have a sleepover, and you kindly but confidently say, “I'm afraid tonight's not a good night for that.” This image would apply:

#### **PARENT IS IN CHARGE**

Let's say your daughter asks, "Why not?" and you reply, "Because you're too tired. You've been crabby since you got home from soccer." Your daughter says, "No, I'm not; I just had a bad game," and you respond with, "I don't think it's because you had a bad game, honey. You were cranky before you left the house." And your daughter says, "I was only cranky because you were trying to make me eat cereal I hate." And you say, "You usually love that cereal!" And she says . . . you get the picture. You're now in the land of "The Two Lawyers."

### **NO ONE IS IN CHARGE: "THE TWO LAWYERS"**

If the situation deteriorates further still, you'll hear your daughter say something like, "If you don't let me have a sleepover, I'm not going to set the table." You respond, "Oh, yes, you most certainly are, young lady, if you want to watch any TV for the rest of the weekend!" (Note the desperate tone creeping into your voice as you attempt to assert your authority.) For all practical purposes, the child is now running the show, and you're issuing either threats or bribes to try to get back in charge.

### **CHILD IS IN CHARGE**

I'll be elaborating on this further, but I hope this gives you a sense of the difference between a) being genuinely in charge, b) jockeying for the role of ship Captain with your child, and c) trying to overpower her when things have deteriorated. The following is a real-life example that illustrates how easily this can happen between parent and child.

## **The Challenge of Getting a Sleepy, Unmotivated Eleven-Year-Old Up for School in the Morning**

Stella came to me in utter frustration. Her eleven-year-old son, Sam, refused to get up for school and every morning was so filled with drama that both mother and son were emotionally drained before they had even begun their day. Stella reported that every morning she went into Sam's room and woke him up sweetly with a kind voice and a little foot rub.

No response. Stella then said she would speak a little more loudly and grab those feet just a bit more firmly. Sam would emit groans and moans. At this point Stella would begin to get impatient, feeling pressured by the clock ticking and the many tasks that still lay ahead to get her kids to school.

"Honey, remember we talked about this last night, and you agreed to get up on time today?" Silence. "Okay, Sam, I'm warning you. I'm going to go get your brother ready and put breakfast on the table. If you don't get up in one minute, you're gonna be late!"

It's important to understand that Sam doesn't actually have a problem. Either he doesn't care if he's late, or he is too sleepy to have access to the part of his brain that believes getting to school on time is important. Promises made the night before are filed in some distant part of his memory. So far, the only one with a dilemma is Mom, and she's starting to panic because she's having trouble making Sam solve her problem.

So now what happens? Mom ends up going into Sam's room five more times, yelling, threatening to leave without him, and lecturing him about why "this simply cannot and will not happen again" (something she says every morning, suggesting she has very little credibility in her son's eyes). Stella has totally lost her cool, despite vowing to keep it together, and she's angry with herself—and Sam—for being unable to avoid

this train wreck yet again.

Sam, scrambling to get dressed, matches his mother's drama with his own, screaming about how Mom should've woken him a different way, or blaming his brother, whose coughing in the night woke him up and made him especially tired. Sam has little awareness—despite Mom's valiant efforts to enlighten him—that every morning he has a list of excuses.

### **NO ONE IS IN CHARGE: “THE TWO LAWYERS”**

The family rushes out the door, tense, stressed, and either yelling at one another or hardly speaking. Stella tells her son that it's his fault that she got angry. She comes home from the school drop-off feeling remorseful, angry, and powerless to see a way out of this daily morning chaos.

### **CHILD IS IN CHARGE**

When your child doesn't do what you ask and you become emotional or begin delivering ever-escalating threats, he senses your panic. Your dramatic responses literally shift the hierarchy; for all practical purposes, you've handed responsibility for the outcome over to the child. This is not being the Captain of your ship!

## **Pushing Creates Power Struggles and Resistance**

In my workshops, I illustrate an important idea by having participants stand up with their palms against mine. Without giving any instructions, I lean forward, pushing forcibly against their hands. Invariably, they push back with equal or greater force. After this demonstration I ask, “Did I ask you to push against me?” Their answer is always, “No, actually, you didn't!”

What we discover is that when one person in a relationship starts pushing, the other instinctively pushes back. But you can't have two people pushing against each other if one of them doesn't participate! You can't have a power struggle with only one person engaged.

Although the actual words and actions you take with a child who won't get up in the morning will depend on all kinds of variables—his investment in getting to school on time, his age, the consequences he might face from teachers if he's late—what's important is the energetic place you inhabit as you parent. When you're firmly rooted in your authority as the Captain of the ship, these dramatic, escalating interactions with your children cannot happen. The Captain doesn't negotiate with his crew or passengers to be in charge; he simply is in charge.

What is the first requirement for staying grounded in your authority? Remain calm, at all costs. It becomes much easier to stay centered when you let go of giving your children the power to make or break your serenity depending on how they behave.

## **Back to Stella**

I asked Stella this question: “What importance have you assigned to your child getting to school on time? Do you worry about receiving a call from a disagreeable office lady announcing that your son will be staying after school because he has too many tardies? Have you decided that it's the mark of a ‘good mother’ to instill a sense of responsibility in your child? Have you interpreted his nonchalant attitude about being late to

school as meaning that you have failed to teach him the importance of punctuality? What are you making your son's behavior mean? “

When we give our children the power to make us feel that we are or are not good parents—or good people—we've relegated the job of steering the ship to them, all the while hoping, threatening, and begging them to guide it in the particular way we want it to go so we get the outcome we think we need.

I helped Stella use a process called The Work<sup>1</sup> by Byron Katie. Katie's approach is based on the understanding that it's not the events around us that trigger our upset, but our thoughts about those events. In the context of parenting, it's our beliefs and stories about how our kids should behave that cause us to lose our cool. Some of us know we're stuck in a story of our own creation if our heart starts pounding and our mind obsessively replays what they did. Others find ourselves tempted to tell our friends about our child's misbehavior to get validation for our anger. And many parents deliver unproductive or even irrational threats to get their kids to listen and obey. The Work is about looking at these beliefs and reactions so we can be free of their negative influence on how we respond to the challenges of parenting.

The Work consists of asking four questions about the belief or thought that precipitates our upset.

#### **THE FOUR QUESTIONS**

1. Is it true?
2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?
3. How do you feel (or react) when you think that thought?
4. Who would you be without that thought?

One way to identify the thought at the core of our upset is to find a statement with the word “should” or “shouldn't” in it, and to then determine whether that thought causes you to feel a strong rush of negative emotion. Look for a belief that gets your blood boiling and sends adrenaline coursing through your veins—one that has some juice behind it, or that gets you to go from zero to sixty in a few seconds. Typically, it will be a thought that prompts you to start building a case, like a lawyer, and to then look for evidence that justifies your strong reaction. Some examples:

“My kids should come to dinner the first time I call them.”

“My husband shouldn't give our son junk food when I'm not home.”

“My son should take a shower.”

“My daughter shouldn't whine.”

These kinds of thoughts throw us off our game and cause us to lose the calm feeling of being in charge. They also prompt us to come at our kids—provoking their defensiveness and resistance—rather than coming alongside them, which promotes their receptivity.

## Using the Four Questions with Stella

Here is how I used this approach with Stella. First, we identified the upsetting belief that precipitated the ineffective way she handled the morning drama with her son: “My son, Sam, should try to get up for school on time in the morning.”

I asked Stella, “Is it true that your son should try to get up for school on time?”

Stella responded, “Of course it’s true. It’s important for Sam to learn how to manage his time and work within schedules. And it gets his day off to a better start when he’s not frantically scrambling into the classroom door at the last minute.”

I responded, “Okay, I understand. Getting up late creates problems. Now, can you absolutely know that it’s true that your son should get up on time for school in the morning?”

Sounding a little hesitant, but still defensive, Stella replied, “Well, I can’t absolutely know it’s true. I wish he would wake up on time to get to school, but I can’t absolutely know that it’s true that he should. The reality is that he certainly doesn’t want to get up on time.”

I probed a little further with the third question. “How do you react or behave when you believe this story that Sam should try to get up on time for school in the morning, and he doesn’t?”

“I’m tense, frustrated, and upset with him for creating this drama every day. I judge him: ‘Why can’t he be more responsible? Why is he so lazy? Why is he doing this to me?’ I don’t feel any of those warm, fuzzy mommy feelings when I think about all this. I take it personally, seeing his behavior as a sign of disrespect toward his teacher and toward me. I feel frustrated and helpless, and I’m cross with him for making me feel that way.”

“Stella, here’s the fourth question: Who would you be without this thought, this story that your son should try to get up on time in the morning? How would you be different if you simply noticed that he wasn’t getting ready, without the negative commentary running in your mind? Now remember, I’m not asking you to stop caring about getting him to school on time, or to abandon all hope of helping him learn how to get himself up in the morning. I’m just asking who you’d be if you didn’t feel the tension and frustration that come from believing this story so staunchly.”

She thought for a moment and said, “Well, if I didn’t believe he should try to get up on time, I suppose I’d be much more relaxed about the whole thing. I might be curious about what would happen if I didn’t push and pull him. Now that I think about it, maybe if I were less attached to his getting up on time, he might compensate for my lack of anxiety about it by coming up with some strategies of his own for moving the morning along better.”

“Okay, that’s great, Stella. Now let’s look at the turnaround. Can we look at how the opposite of ‘My son should get up on time for school’ might be true? Give me three reasons that there might be some truth or value in ‘My son shouldn’t get up on time in the morning for school.’ I know it sounds crazy, but what are some reasons it might make its own kind of sense that he shouldn’t pop out of bed in the morning?”

“Whoa. That sounds like I’m signing up to be a bad parent. All right, I’ll give it a go. One reason? He doesn’t like school and puts it off as long as possible. He loves the feeling of being cozy in bed and wants to

enjoy it as long as he can. He is, after all, a kid, and most kids would rather be home in their comfy bed than in a ‘boring’ classroom.” Stella paused and then said, “Second reason? It could be that he’s really tired. Sam has trouble falling asleep at night, and I’ve often wondered whether he’s actually getting enough rest. He does seem genuinely sleepy in the morning when I wake him.

“And maybe a third reason is that he’s been struggling a lot with his schoolwork. He even told me last week that he thinks he’s stupid. So I guess maybe he’s not all that motivated to go to a place where he doesn’t feel very confident or successful. Wow! I can’t believe I could actually come up with three reasons why his behavior makes its own kind of sense. Now that I’m thinking this way, I can actually think of other reasons he might not be motivated to roll out of bed when I want him to!”

Stella came to understand that if she loosened her grip on the story of what her son should be doing, and considered the reasons that Sam’s slow-motion behavior made sense, she would be able to approach the situation in a healthier way. More important, until she stopped making Sam responsible for her anger and frustration, she would continue to engage in this power struggle with her son. I told Stella, “He who is most attached to a particular outcome has the least amount of power.”

When we become willing to take an honest look at the beliefs and stories we maintain—often while we’re busily gathering evidence to support their validity—we become more capable of dealing with our kids in a way that promotes their receptivity rather than their resistance. Taking an honest look at our judgments about their behavior allows us to have conversations with our kids that don’t come with the aroma of needing them to be different so we can feel better.

If you want children to be receptive to you, clean up what’s going on between your ears—the thoughts and stories that precipitate your anger, fear, or disappointment—before you try to have any influence over them. Difficult conversations go far better without the negative stories and judgments that affect how you conduct yourself.

By the way, this process is equally valuable with spouses, bosses, and neighbors. Imagine how much better a conversation with your chronically late husband might be if you first dealt with the thought “John shouldn’t leave things for the last minute” and instead discovered a few reasons why he should leave things for the last minute. “He feels more focused doing things at the last minute. He gets a lot done in a short time. He has a prefrontal cortex that requires adrenaline to kick-start his energy when the things he has to do are boring.” Having done this mental exercise, you would then be able to ask for help in managing the anxiety you feel when he’s rushing around at the last minute as the two of you are trying to leave the house without the blame, shame, and guilt trips that make him feel judged and cause him to resist and slow down.

Consider whether what you’re saying opens or closes the door to the other person you want to influence. Does being under the influence of your negative beliefs help or hurt in getting your message across? Most likely it sabotages your goal of resolving a problem by transforming what could be useful discussion into a power struggle.

**CONSIDER WHETHER WHAT YOU’RE SAYING OPENS OR CLOSES THE DOOR TO THE OTHER PERSON YOU WANT TO INFLUENCE.**

## **Thoughts as Drugs**

I think in images, and have created one that often helps my clients better understand the effects their beliefs

have on their behavior and experience. I explained to Stella the idea of “thoughts as drugs.”

“Imagine we took that upsetting thought of yours—‘Sam should try to get up on time for school in the morning’—and compressed it into pill form. Now, as with any pill or drug, when you swallow it, you’re under the influence of the drug that it contains, which in this case is the influence of that belief. The story you’ve chosen to believe infiltrates your consciousness, and you’re now at the mercy of its effect on you.” Stella liked this analogy and gave a half smile as she said, “Well, I can think of a whole lot of ‘pills’ I swallow when it comes to my kids—and my husband!”

“Okay, now about Sam’s not getting up in time: try to imagine not swallowing that pill. Imagine not being under the influence of that belief—not having it take hold of you. How might you be different around Sam if you didn’t so firmly believe that he should try to get up for school on time? And how might he respond to you if you weren’t so staunchly defending your belief about his behavior?”

“I imagine he’d be more open to me if I were more relaxed and didn’t come at him so aggressively.”

Stepping back to look at the situation objectively, Stella was able to get clear about what she was making Sam’s behavior mean. The first thing she realized was that she was turning it into something he was doing personally to her. Naturally, when she believed Sam’s slow-motion movements were intended to deliberately show his mom that he didn’t respect her, it triggered her anger. When I guided Stella through the four questions around the belief “Sam doesn’t try to wake up on time in the morning because he doesn’t respect me,” it quickly became clear that it wasn’t true.

She looked at the many ways her son did respect her and realized that his problems waking up had far more to do with his fatigue or lack of interest in school than it did with wanting to make trouble for his mother.

Another belief Stella discovered that had been fueling her anger had to do with what she imagined other people thought about her when she pulled up late at school to drop Sam off, as the final bell was ringing. She admitted she didn’t want to look bad in the eyes of other parents and the office staff.

As she became willing to see how she had been misinterpreting her son’s motives, or how she was trying to use his behavior to gain the approval of others, Stella became more empowered to consider ways to activate Sam’s internal motivation to get to school on time in a way that was “clean.”

Soon after our meeting, Stella went into Sam’s room in the early evening and invited him to have a talk. The two of them had shared some laughs earlier at the dinner table. As the Captain of the ship, Stella noticed that the waters were calm and that this might be a good time for a little “maintenance.” Sam was open to talking, and Stella began by setting the tone as being between allies rather than adversaries.

“Sweetie, I’ve been thinking about our mornings—taking a good look at what goes on that creates all the stress.” Sam became defensive, assuming his mom was about to lay into him as usual: “Mom, it’s not my fault! My alarm clock always seems to break, and a lot of times you don’t help by getting all uptight and mean!”

Having done her work in advance, Stella didn’t start defending herself. She also didn’t try to take apart her son’s excuses, as she would have done in the past.

 **PARENT IS IN CHARGE**

“Honey, I know it’s hard for you to get up in the morning. I get that. I imagine it’s not easy to pop out of bed when you’re tired and want to sleep some more. It must be hard when you’re feeling so cozy. Especially when I get so upset.” Sam seemed taken aback by what his mom was saying. “What’s it like for you, Sam, to have to get up so early every day?”

“It sucks.”

Stella responded gently. “I see that, Sam. The more I think about it, the more I picture how awful it might be to hear that alarm go off. I can imagine you’d much rather roll over and go back to sleep. I wonder if it’s even harder lately, now that it seems like your schoolwork has gotten more difficult.” Stella knew she might not be offering the right reasons, but she wanted her son to get the feeling that she really wanted to understand the situation from Sam’s vantage point.

“Yeah, it is hard. I just hate getting up. It’s so stupid that school starts so early.”

“Sam, wouldn’t it be fantastic if schools were redesigned to start at ten in the morning!”

“Yes! Or, like, noon!”

“And I’ll bet it would be easier to get up for school if you knew all the work would be easy. That would be the perfect fantasy school: one that started at noon and just had easy schoolwork to do!”

Sam chimed in, “Yea! And NO MATH AT ALL!”

By creating a loving atmosphere and giving her son the feeling that she was on his side, Stella was helping him feel receptive to her suggestions and support. He ended up telling her more about his struggles with math, and Stella began to brainstorm ways to help him get back on track with that subject. She was being the calm, confident Captain of the ship that her son needed, rather than a frantic mom who was desperate to change his behavior so she could feel okay.

From this place of genuine authority, Stella moved the conversation toward some solutions to their morning drama. Together they came up with some new ideas. Sam agreed to get his backpack in the car by nine o’clock the night before. Stella offered to wake him up with a protein smoothie that would give him a little boost and help him feel more alert and grounded. They agreed it would be better for her to wake him ten minutes earlier so Sam could linger in bed a little while. As Stella practiced holding her position as Captain of the ship and keeping the turmoil out of their morning routine, she was amazed at how much more willing Sam was to try his best to wake up on time.

This isn’t to say that every morning was easy. There were (and probably still are) days when Sam was grouchy or moving slowly. But Stella learned to avoid making the problem worse by hovering over her son. “Sam, it’s seven-forty and I’ll be leaving in five minutes. I know you’re sleepy, and you’d like to stay home. Let me know if I can help you get into the car on time for a ride. Otherwise, you’ll have to get to school on your own because I have to go straight to work.” She found that by delivering this information in a neutral way—which she could genuinely do because the Turnaround process helped take the judgment and edginess out of her voice—Sam pulled himself together, even if he did have to put his shirt and shoes on in the car!

One day, after Sam had been getting himself up and out the door successfully for a few weeks, Stella took the boys to school as usual. After her younger son darted out of the car on his way to class, Stella caught Sam’s hand and said, “Close the door, sweetheart.” To her son’s astonishment and delight, that day was



going to be a Hooky Day for just the two of them. Stella drove out to a nearby lake and pulled out a bag of things she'd secretly packed the night before: comic books (Sam's favorites), checkers, and some art supplies.

The two of them shared a wonderful day together, munching on the picnic lunch Stella had packed, and reconnecting.

Stella noticed that the mornings went even better after that, although she also came to understand that her son most likely was simply not a morning person and that he might continue to struggle with getting himself out the door on time. But with his mom as the Captain of the ship, rather than a fellow passenger who needed him to behave a certain way so she could feel okay, their ship began sailing smoothly.

## **Using the Image of Your Two Hands to Understand the Parent-Child Dynamic**

When Stella participated in dramatic, heated discussions and negotiations with her son, each fighting over the merits of what the other had to say, she was participating in "The Two Lawyers," in which parent and child each attempt to build the strongest case in order to "win." Parents who engage in these kinds of angry negotiations and battles are forfeiting their role as Captain of the ship.

### **NO ONE IS IN CHARGE: "THE TWO LAWYERS"**

When Stella suggested to Sam that it was his fault that she got angry, she was making her son responsible for her ability—or inability—to keep her cool and be in charge.

When parents convince themselves that their children make them upset or force them to resort to threats or bribes, the children are in charge. Passengers are not meant to be Captains; when they attempt to take over the leadership position, problems are inevitable.

### **CHILD IS IN CHARGE**

When Stella came alongside her son, calmly acknowledging his point of view without pushing against him or creating a power struggle, she activated his receptivity. When a ship's Captain knows he's in charge, he doesn't flaunt it or need to convince the passengers; nor does he need them to like him. He owns his role, with or without their approval.

### **PARENT IS IN CHARGE**

## **Children Want and Need to Feel Dependent on Us**

As fun as a passenger might think it would be if the Captain were to hand the steering wheel over to him, after a moment or two he would start to feel edgy and insist that the skipper take over. As passengers, we want the sense of security that comes from knowing the Captain is confidently at the helm.

Have you ever noticed the difference in children's behavior when there's a blackout or a disaster, or when they're in a foreign country? Kids are more compliant and cooperative when they're in an unfamiliar situation; their natural instinct to follow their parents is fully activated in these situations. There's something about being dependent on a parent that's comforting to a child. (I've even seen parents who've tripped the

circuit breakers in their house when things got terribly out of hand in order to “create” a blackout situation in which the kids had to look to Mom and Dad for guidance and comfort!) Children want us to be lovingly in charge. They need it.

There are hundreds of situations in which parents forfeit their position as Captain, but I’ve yet to see one that couldn’t be corrected by these ideas:

- Focus on loosening your need for your child to behave properly so that you can feel you’re a good parent.
- Explore the meaning you’re assigning to your child’s problematic behavior.
- Let go of the drama and threats that simply emphasize how out of control you’ve become.
- Come alongside your child, rather than at him, so he feels you’re his ally and advocate.
- Create a plan and stick to it with quiet authority, even at the cost of having your child dislike you.
- Love your child in the way he most needs it: by being the calm, confident Captain of the ship as your child navigates the sometimes smooth, sometimes rough, waters of growing up.

## QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Question: How can I tell the difference between a threat and a consequence?

Suggestion: Simple. A threat is delivered by someone who feels angry, frustrated, and/or out of control. It’s delivered with hostility, desperation, and aggression. The child is in charge. “If you don’t clean up all your toys right this minute, I’m throwing each and every one of them into the trash can!”

### **CHILD IS IN CHARGE**

A consequence is presented with compassion by a parent who inhabits the role as Captain of the ship. It sounds and feels clean, caring, and calm. It’s delivered without a lot of extra words and has a tone of quiet authority. “I know it’s not much fun to clean up your toys, sweetheart, but keep in mind what we talked about at the family meeting: If you decide to leave them scattered all over the floor when it’s time to tidy up before bed, they’ll go into a bag for a week and you won’t have them to play with for a while.”

### **PARENT IS IN CHARGE**

Question: As my seven-year-old son got out of the car this morning, he punched his five-year-old brother in the face for calling him “stupid.” I freaked out. As much as I like what you say about being cool and in charge, if anyone—including my other offspring—deliberately injures one of my children, the mother lion in

me wakes up and roars. I was furious, and as far from calm as possible. What could I have done differently?

Suggestion: This is one of those examples where the apparent problem—your son punching his younger brother—can distract you from recognizing the real problem. While there are inevitably times when raw immaturity causes a child to act on impulse, many of the upsetting things our children do are symptoms of a different issue. I would start by encouraging you to comfort your injured son, saying little to the older boy while mothering the younger one as needed.

Next, I would ask you to shift your focus from what to do after the fight happened, to the events leading up to that moment. How did the morning go? Did your boys get enough sleep, or were they up late the night before? Did they have waffles and sugary syrup or a balanced, protein-rich breakfast? Do you feel you and your older son are close these days, or does he often show signs of being out of synch and disconnected from you? Was the punch a surprise, or does it seem as though he's continually walking around with a low-grade "fever" of frustration, anger, or sadness? Does your son like to go to school and look forward to it, or does he dread it? What's the relationship like between the two boys? Is there a lot of competitiveness and jockeying for position, or do they generally get along well? If there's a lot of ongoing tension between them, can you see the root of it? Have you considered ways to create more of a natural bond between them rather than offering lectures about how they should love each other and get along? Ship Captains don't just deal with problems when they appear; they scan the horizon for icebergs or storms so they can avoid them. I'm more interested in helping parents prevent outbursts than trying to find the right thing to say or do after they occur. Since you are the Captain of the ship for your child, you have the opportunity to orchestrate his day to help create the greatest likelihood that he will be successful. Instead of looking for Band-Aid solutions—like figuring out what to do when your older son hits his younger brother—I would encourage you to consider how to prevent this from happening.

I would suggest that you take a look at a number of things, many of which I elaborate on in later chapters:

Make sure your kids are getting good food and plenty of sleep. We're all pretty nasty when we're hungry, tired, and going somewhere we don't want to go. Work to reconnect with your older son if your attachment with him seems fragile or weak. And take steps to fortify a real connection between your two sons. (See Chapter 2.) Gently approach your son when he expresses frustration about school, his younger brother, or whatever seems to chronically bug him. He may need to offload a buildup of general frustration that leaks out when the slightest thing offends him. (See Chapter 5.) Teach him ways to describe his feelings and look at the ways his thoughts fuel his anger. Help translate and put into words what he's feeling. (See Chapter 6.)

Manage your own distress so you can be the calm, clear-headed parent he needs when he's hurt, angry, or frustrated. You offer him his best shot at learning how to manage his own reactions when he sees you staying centered, even in the midst of the storm.

Take an honest look at the opposite of whatever thoughts get you so triggered that you lose your temper. This might be as simple as transforming the phrase "My son shouldn't hit his little brother" into "My son should hit his little brother." If you, as Captain of the ship, are willing to consider that if your older boy is hungry, tired, disconnected from you, chronically frustrated, sick of going to school, or secretly thinking he is stupid, then you may be able to see why hitting his brother is an inevitable response to being teased. By keeping your cool and helping your son feel his feelings fully, you can guide him from frustration to adaptation.

Meanwhile, after the incident has happened (although I hope it won't happen as frequently once some of these ideas are implemented), calmly approach your children and say something like, "You boys are clearly

having a rough morning. We're going to need to do things differently; hitting and mean words aren't allowed." In a quiet voice you may tell both boys the consequence of their choices, but your goal for the moment is first to simply help all of you settle down.

In my way of thinking, a "clean" consequence is the natural result of a choice a child has made, based simply on the notion of cause and effect. Rather than inventing random consequences in the heat of the moment (better known as punishments in disguise), I prefer that parents tell their children in advance what sorts of things will happen if they make a poor decision, or if they cross lines, like hitting or insulting. For some families, this might mean doing something practical: If Shane deliberately breaks Ethan's toy, he will need to earn some or all of the money to replace it. For others, it might mean making emotional amends: If Shane chooses to hurt his brother by breaking his toy, he needs to do something helpful for Ethan, such as spend a half an hour helping him work on his science project.

My favorite format for introducing consequences to children is in a family meeting: Children take this even more seriously if you have a clipboard and take notes while the family discusses possible outcomes for failing to live up to the family's standards of cooperation and kindness. (As an aside, I am not a big fan of forcing children to apologize, and then assuming things are back on track. While this is sometimes all that's necessary, children who chronically violate others and are coerced into offering up an apology simply become good at apologizing; they don't generally modify their behavior very much.)

There may be times when your child has misbehaved and you will spontaneously announce that he's going to have to do extra chores or forgo playing with a friend. Still, my preference is that parents prevent problems rather than focus on what to do after they've occurred.

While a ship's Captain might steer northwest if that's the direction of his final destination, if he's in the midst of a storm and traveling northwest means he's going to be pummeled by waves, he's going to temporarily head southeast. Similarly, during the storm of your child's misbehavior, avoid lecturing, explaining, or advising. This is not a teachable moment. First, get through the storm, and then talk about what happened, after you've all settled down.

Resist the temptation to focus exclusively on this incident; look at the bigger picture of what was fueling your son's aggressiveness. If you see this morning's problem in a larger context, chances are you'll be able to change what triggered the problem, so you can avoid a repeat performance in the future.

Question: I've tried all kinds of things to keep from yelling at my kids. Even though I like your ideas—and I admit I haven't used your approach yet—I have tried a lot of things like counting to ten and trying to remember how much I love my kids when I'm struggling to not lose my temper, all without much success. Do you really believe somebody like me, who's so naturally fiery and reactive, can learn to be calm when I've developed so many bad habits?

Suggestion: Yes! One of the things that most compelled me to write this book was the feedback from people like you who reported that these approaches really did help them to stop the blood-boiling reactivity that caused them to yell at their kids. We all come with unique temperaments, and some of us run "hotter" than others. But it's always our thoughts about the events of our lives—rather than the events themselves—that cause us to get upset. A person with a shorter fuse rushes more quickly from zero to sixty, but the precipitator that ignites his fuse is still going to be the meaning he assigns to whatever triggers his reaction.

If you try these strategies for stepping back from the thoughts and beliefs that kick you into the mire of frustration and anger, including the Four Questions presented in this chapter, it will no longer be so easy for

you to get thrown off by your children's behavior. (You may also want to sign up for my Parenting Without Power Struggles newsletter, [www.parentingwithoutpowerstruggles.com](http://www.parentingwithoutpowerstruggles.com), to help you maintain support for instituting these new strategies.)

Rather than asking you to "just think positive thoughts" or to vent about your frustration, I invite you to challenge the beliefs and stories that cause you to lose your temper. Doing so will help you dissipate anger at its source. I'm excited for you to try these approaches, and confident that if you do, you're going to find yourself no longer willing to be yanked around by the stories that bring on those bouts of shouts. It feels good to parent from a place of quiet authority. And yes, doing so is within your reach.

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