



The Child's Need To Belong: Part 3 Meeting The Goal Of Power

In our last two sessions we talked about the child's need to belong, and how a child's behavior is directed towards getting this emotional connection of belonging.

As I previously pointed out, a child's behavior is driven by four unconscious goals: contact, power, protection and withdrawal.

In my last session I talked about how we can help a child meet the goal of contact by encouraging cooperation. I showed you an often overlooked way to encourage cooperation...by giving our children choices.

Today I'd like to visit with you about how we can help our children in meeting their goal of power.

This unconscious goal of power, which all children possess, drives them to become independent adults.

To help children meet this goal of power, there are three basic steps we should use:

- First, we help our children develop skills.
- Second, as skills develop we give our children added responsibility.
- Third, as responsibilities are met we grant new freedoms, thus enlarging the child's circle of power.

Three steps: Skill. Responsibility. Freedom.

One of the paradoxes of parenting I've found is this: We are raising adults, not children.

This job is not an easy one. As the child gets larger and larger, as their circle of power grows, we should become smaller and smaller.

Our parenting and teaching objective is to produce an independent adult. Our job is to help the child enlarge his circle of power.

We begin with a helpless newborn that needs us for every activity.



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When our children can function independently of us...when they don't need us...our work is complete.

Being aware of this goal of power and how we can help our children grow their circle of power will help us avoid the power struggles and conflict that keep children from feeling like they belong.

When a child's goal of power is being met, we observe a child who demonstrates growing independence in his every day activities.

- We see this independence as children learn to dress themselves, feed themselves, and enlarge their skills in movement, language and interacting with others.
- We see a child who voices an opinion and participates in decision-making. This child is an active participant in his life.
- These children feel responsible for their actions, as well as feel responsible for their lives. They want to help out in their homes. They want to clean up after themselves. If they break a glass because of carelessness, they learn to be more careful, because that enlarges their circle of power.

For the child whose goal of power is not met, we might see rebellion on one hand, and passive resignation on the other. And we might feel angry about the child's behavior.

- The rebellious child feels a sense of belonging only when she is the boss or asserting that she can't be bossed around.
- The passive child may avoid interaction, act helpless, or demand our assistance for simple activities she should be able to do independently, such as dressing or feeding herself.

To help a child gain and maintain power we need to make sure that freedom follows responsibility.

To do this we should consider these three questions:

1. How can we offer more responsibility?
2. When do we offer more responsibility to the child?
3. What freedoms follow the child's taking on new responsibility?



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1. How Can We Offer More Responsibility?

We can offer more responsibility by helping our children learn new skills and practice current skills.

For example, our toddler wants to turn the pages of a book, but ends up tearing pages.



To help our child learn a new skill, we slowly show the child how to turn a page, and allow him to practice using magazines until the skill is developed.

When we see that this new skill of turning pages carefully is being consistently used, we should allow added responsibility and grant freedom that comes from that responsibility.

- **We tell our child the skill they have learned.**
Jaden, you know how to turn a page in a book carefully.
- **We let the child know his responsibility.**
I see that you know how to take care of our books.
- **And the freedom that follows that responsibility.**
Because you are careful with our books, now you may look at books by yourself and turn the pages without me helping you.

The key to enlarging the child's circle of power:

We teach skills that lead to greater responsibility and freedom.

As we help our child build new skills, accept greater responsibility, and earn additional freedoms, we may encounter occasional power struggles with our child. If you do consider these three actions:

- Change the environment.
- Change the rules.
- Change our attitude.



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For example, our three-year-old climbs up on the cabinets to get to the snacks when we've told her not climb in the kitchen.

With this behavior we should see that she is trying to meet the goal of power by getting snack by herself.

We might change the environment:

Perhaps we rearrange our kitchen to put healthy snacks in a low drawer or cabinet so our child can independently get snack. We might add a child-sized table and chair where our child can learn to prepare a snack and clean up by herself.

If appropriate, we could change the rules:

If our rule is no snacks between meals, we might consider our child climbing up on the cabinet as defiant behavior. Perhaps we could change our rule and allow healthy snacks between meals and avoid a power struggle. Teaching our child how to prepare a healthy snack leads to a skill that leads to responsibility, that leads to freedom to have a snack when desired.

Finally, maybe we could change our attitude:

Maybe we aren't the only ones who can prepare a snack. Or maybe snack doesn't have to be on our schedule.

When we change our attitude, teaching our child how to prepare a healthy snack as well as how to clean up afterwards, we help our child meet her unconscious goal of power.

When you are trying to consider how to offer your child more responsibility, remember to ask yourself these questions:

- How can I help my child do this activity independently?
- Can I teach new skills?
- Should I change the environment?
- Change the rules?
- Do I need to change my attitude?

We help our child meet the goal of power by teaching skills in order to offer our child more responsibility and freedom.



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2. When Do We Offer More Responsibility To Our Child?

The simple answer is, as we see skills develop we offer the next step.

If we see signs of rebellion and/or frustration in our child, we need to step back and ask:

- Am I offering enough skill building, responsibility, and freedom in that area where I see the rebellious behavior?

For the passive child, the child who refuses to engage, we need to look carefully at skills.

- Has the child learned the skill? Or has she forgotten it?
- Do we need to encourage the child to try?
- Do we need to teach the skill again?

Again, as we see that our child has the skill to act independently, we need to offer responsibilities and freedoms that correspond to that skill.



For example, your child learns to crack eggs into a bowl.

Perhaps the responsibility that follows is to carry the egg carton to the refrigerator.

We let him know the skill:

I see that you can carefully crack six eggs. You make sure there are no tiny bits of shell in the bowl.

We offer the responsibility:

Would you like to put the eggs back in the refrigerator by yourself? I see that you are careful with eggs.

We offer the freedom:

Now when we are cooking you can get the eggs out of the refrigerator by yourself. And you can put the eggs back in, too.

Skill. Responsibility. Freedom to act independently.



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3. What Freedoms Follow The Child's Taking On New Responsibility?

In terms of offering freedom, we can simply ask our children what they need in terms of responsibility and freedom.

It doesn't need to be difficult. We can ask our children:

- What would you like to learn next?
- What would you like to be able to do?

As we see our child develop skills and assume responsibility for those skills, we need to consider, as well as ask our child, what freedoms should be allowed.



For example, our teenager earns their drivers license. He has mastered the basic skills for driving.

As we see corresponding judgment develop and responsibilities met, such as being punctual, returning the car with the gas tank

filled, cleaning the car, taking the car to be serviced, or driving family members to appointments...what freedoms should follow?

We can simply ask our child what additional freedoms he desires.

Freedoms, of course, will be family specific.

In this example perhaps the freedom requested by our teenager might be to use the car on Saturday evenings, or to go to school.

When a responsibility is shirked, then freedom should be reduced or taken away.

The freedom should be earned again by showing competency in skills and responsibility.

Leave the gas tank sitting on empty? Does the freedom to drive the car remain? Or does it have to be regained?

To help us guide our children, we should carefully watch the dynamics and balance among skill, responsibility, and freedom.



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It is this process of building skills, and assuming responsibility and freedom to act independently, that helps our children meet their unconscious goal of power. The process enlarges their circle of power, and it helps them feel like they belong.

SUMMARY

If you see your children doing something you think he shouldn't be doing, remember to ask yourself these questions:

- How can I help my child do this activity independently?
- Can I teach new skills?
- Should I change the environment?
- Change the rules?
- Do I need to change my attitude?

If you see signs of rebellion and/or frustration, step back from any anger you might feel, and ask:

- Am I offering enough skill building, responsibility and freedom in the area where I observe this behavior?

As we see our child build skills and manage more responsibilities, we should consider, as well as involve our children in deciding, what freedoms should be allowed.

As skills grow and responsibilities are accepted, freedoms should be granted, allowing us to confidently become smaller and smaller as our children become larger and larger.

Time To Put This Into Action.

In what areas does your child already act independently?

How does your child express the need for more freedom?

- Via rebellion or bossiness?
- By being apathetic?
- Or by asking for assistance in learning and practicing skills?

As your child builds new skills, what new responsibilities can she assume?

And, what, if any, new freedoms are earned?



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For more put-it-into action ideas, head on over to MarenSchmidt.com where you have lots of resources available as a Kids Talk Reader.

Resources:

Adler, Alfred. *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler*. Harper Torch Books (1964)

Dreikurs, Rudolf. *Children: The Challenge*. Plume Publications (1964)

Popkin, Michael. *Active Parenting Handbook*. Active Parenting, Inc. (1983)