

Introduction

As a parent, you have likely noticed that there are many well-written parenting guides that typically go into great detail about how to set limits for your child to make for a more harmonious family environment. There are also parenting experts who will tell you how to get your child to follow directions and to behave. These books and experts tell you a lot about the *mechanics* of good parenting, and often a light of recognition is turned on. But something is missing. You try to apply what you read and you still find that your child does not respond or responds temporarily before going his own way.

In a favorite catchphrase, most experts will tell you that your child doesn't follow directions because "you have failed to be consistent," and that you have failed to be consistent because you have not applied a consequence every time your child engages in inappropriate behavior. In retrospect, you recognize this failure on your part, but why have you failed? You want to do the right thing, but you don't follow through. Why do you have such a difficult time remaining consistent with your child? After all, you have been told either by books or by professionals that your child will respond only if you, the parent, are consistent in delivering consequences. If you are inconsistent, you shoot yourself in the foot.

Are you really a glutton for punishment? Are you addicted to fighting endlessly with your daughter to pick up after herself? to wake up on time? to do her homework? Of course not. Perhaps you are unable to be consistent because of a dynamic that exists within your interaction with her. Imagine this: While you are worrying over your own consistency, your child is doing everything within her power to ensure that you are not consistent. And why would she do this? The following pages will share insights I have gathered over years of clinical practice that may help you reexamine your beliefs.

As a psychologist who has worked with thousands of families in conflict, I have found that parents are often puzzled about why their children act the way they do. Every day in my office, parents utter the same pleas for help: "We don't understand why he always has to fight with us!" or "We need help! Getting her to respond is a constant battle." (Since all the issues in this book pertain to parents and children of both sexes, I will vary third-person singular pronouns when used in a generic sense.) Keep in mind that these parents may have read the books that you have read. They have been told exactly how to reward their child's positive responses. And they have been taught how to deliver an appropriate consequence when their child has failed to respond. These parents are not uninformed. Nor are they bad parents. They are good parents, just like you and me, but they are frustrated. And they are frustrated because they cannot figure out how to get their child to follow directions and behave.

As a parent and a psychologist, I have spent a great deal of time observing the interactions of children and parents in an effort to identify why parents struggle with their children's behavior. I have examined my relationship with my own children. I have also taken time to reflect on my childhood and the misery I inflicted on my parents. They deserve an award for the fact that I am still around to write this book. I wanted to better

understand why children don't respond (or respond negatively) to their parents' wishes. My observations have led me to a new perspective on why children are defiant and fail to follow directions. This perspective brought me to new ideas that I believe will revolutionize the way you parent your child.

I have come to the conclusion that children rely on seventeen unique ways to manipulate their parents in order to get what they want. I call these seventeen manipulation strategies the *Tools of Power*.

This book will serve as a manual to guide you through the obstacle course of your child's seventeen Tools of Power. It will help you understand why your child manipulates and will give you the countertools to respond effectively. It will also help you understand why you, as a parent, fall prey to your child's Tools of Power, and it will enable you to decrease his need to use them in the future.

Most parents know some basic mechanics of parenting. They punish their child for inappropriate forms of behavior, and they may reward their child for appropriate behavior. These parents have learned that negative behavior decreases if it is met with punishment and that appropriate behavior increases with rewards. I refer to the methods of punishment and reward as the *mechanics* of parenting.

If you have purchased this book, you are probably not happy with your degree of success using the mechanics of parenting. Don't feel alone. Many parents feel frustrated because they find that the mechanics of parenting do not always work. The mechanics of parenting sometimes fail, but not because they are faulty. Punishment really does decrease inappropriate behavior, and happily, rewards increase appropriate behavior. The mechanics of parenting fail because of an emotional process that takes place during your attempt to employ them. More specifically, punishments and rewards fail because your child has figured out how to push your emotional buttons so that you become inconsistent. He pushes your emotional buttons through the use of his Tools of Power.

Every parent has emotional buttons—that is, the triggers to our most sensitive responses. The primary purpose for a child's use of a Tool of Power is to push emotional buttons to get what she wants or to even the score. For example, you may find it difficult to accept your child's expression of sadness. If so, your child can push your emotional buttons simply by crying. Perhaps you have a strong need for your child to show you respect. If so, your child can push your emotional buttons by treating you disrespectfully. As a reaction to emotional button pushing, you may be left feeling anxious, angry, or sad. Either way, if your child pushes your emotional buttons, she does it to be gratified. Your child is gratified by your reaction to her emotional button pushing. Emotional button pushing often goes something like this: The child's anger compels her to want to even the score and make her parent angry as well. Further, she instinctively knows that she can upset her parent by continuing to ask for what she wants; it has worked before. A typical scenario goes like this:

CHILD: I want a cookie.

PARENT: Not now. We're about to eat dinner.

CHILD (whining): But, Mom, I'll eat dinner. Can I have just one cookie?

PARENT (firmly): No. Not until after dinner.

CHILD (realizing she won't get the cookie, she becomes angry): I hate that rule. I want a cookie now!

PARENT (tension in voice): Ask me again and you won't get one after dinner.

CHILD: How about half now and half later?

PARENT (yelling): I said no! No means no!

CHILD (playing into Mom's anger): Well, you don't have to yell about it. I just asked for a cookie.

In this case, the parent falls prey to the child's emotional button pushing and is exploited by a Tool of Power that I call Punishment. Her angry emotional reaction has gratified the child. Mom's anger is precisely the reaction her daughter needs in order to know that her Tool of Power has been effective. In this case, the child's defiant behavior is rewarded. And this parent will have to contend with similar forms of behavior in the future because, for the child, the tool has worked: It has proven to be an effective way to alleviate her intense feelings of anger.

Emotional button pushing is very powerful. Most children report that using a Tool of Power is so gratifying that the satisfaction they derive from pushing those buttons surpasses any fear they have of consequences. It is safe to say that if your child were to be placed in a position in which she felt compelled to push your emotional buttons, all the while knowing that she would be punished for doing so, she would go ahead and do it anyway. Seeing your reaction to her button pushing is that gratifying. And this is precisely the reason that the mechanics of parenting fail.

Parents who fall prey to emotional button pushing do so because they mistakenly believe that the mechanics of parenting always work and that children can maintain a mature degree of empathy when they are emotionally invested in getting what they want. It also assumes that children are capable of delaying gratification. These are three common misconceptions that you need to understand and overcome to avoid falling prey to frustration.

What follows will enable you to understand these common misconceptions and will lead you to the primary purpose of this book: to educate you on the seventeen ways your child manipulates, and to teach you to avoid being manipulated. I call these seventeen manipulation strategies Tools of Power because they are the only real power your child possesses in his relationship with you. And they are quite powerful indeed because they draw on your vulnerabilities as a parent. These seventeen Tools of Power work because your child has figured out how to successfully push your emotional buttons to get what he wants.

Don't be overly alarmed if your child exhibits the behaviors described in this book. Manipulative behavior is not an indication that your child is lacking moral character. It doesn't mean he is a terrible person. It mostly means he has not reached the level of

maturity to be able to delay gratification. It also means that he has certain needs that he wants met. His manipulative behavior is his way of getting those needs met.

But as a parent, your main goal isn't getting his needs met. Your goal is nurturing, protecting, and strengthening your child so he can learn to operate in the world successfully. And success isn't measured by always getting your own way. Children who master the Tools of Power, thereby manipulating their parents to satisfy their amorphous instant gratification, don't usually become successful adults. They become narcissists with lifelong relationship problems.

So your goal is to nullify those Tools of Power—render them ineffective.

In the last part of this book, I am going to share with you a method I have developed that will help you assess your child's temperament. Although many of your child's needs appear to be immediate, such as wanting a cookie or a toy, there is always an underlying need that's not being met. I believe that you will be able to reduce the frequency of your child's manipulation in the future by developing a home structure specifically designed to meet the needs of his temperament.

But first, I want you to understand and know how to identify the Tools of Power your child uses to get his way with you. Once you become aware of these tools, you will be better able to protect yourself against them, and you will find yourself on the road to more successful parenting. And that is the goal of this book. But beware: Most children have more than one tool in their repertoire, and they may try more than one at a time, or quickly switch from one that isn't working to another one that may get the job done. One of the goals of this book is to acquaint you with all these variations and equip you to counteract them.

Each of the seventeen tools is followed by a countermeasure that I have found effective in my practice. After all, what good is recognition without the key to a solution?

Here are the keys. Don't ever forget: You are in the driver's seat.

Emotional Blackmail

Emotional Blackmail refers to your child's deliberate demonstration of a specific emotion that she knows will cause you discomfort. During this process, your child will also assert or imply that you are responsible for the way she is feeling and that the only way she will feel better is if you allow her to have her way. When your child engages in Emotion Blackmail, she relies on tapping into your emotional discomfort. Think of the expression "tugging on your heartstrings."

Emotional Blackmail can be accompanied by such outbursts as "I am so mad at you!" or "I don't care what you say!" or "You're the worst mother in the whole world!" Or your child might use such nonverbal cues as crossing her arms in protest and refusing to look at or talk to you. More often than not, Emotional Blackmail is manifest as anger, but it can also come out in subtler ways, such as in the following encounter:

CHILD (with tension in voice): But, Mom . . . I can do my homework later. I just want to see this show. It's a new episode.

MOTHER (firmly): You always say "later" and later never happens. Now turn off the television or there will be serious consequences.

CHILD (beginning to pout; on the verge of tears): You're so mean. You never let me do anything. You are ruining my life over some stupid TV show.

MOTHER (concerned): That's not true. You get to watch television all the time. Your homework only takes you a few minutes. If you start it now, you should be able to see the end of your show.

CHILD (crying): Yeah, right. You don't care about me. You just like to see me miserable.

MOTHER (attempting to comfort): Why would you say that? You know that I love you and I want you to be happy. But you have to do your homework.

CHILD (persists in crying and begins to curl up in a ball): Just leave me alone. You don't care!

MOTHER (continuing to comfort): Come on, Devin. Stop crying. It's not that bad. I'll even help you get started on your homework.

CHILD (crying intensifies): It's not bad for you, but it's horrible for me!

Clearly, Devin is playing his sad tune with the intention of putting pressure on his mother to eventually give in and allow him to watch his television program. From his mother's reaction, it is also clear why Devin relies on this Tool of Power. Her plea for him to stop crying and her offer to help him start his homework reveal her own vulnerability.

Whether it is instinctual or calculated, his reaction dovetails perfectly into his mother's weakness. He effectively exacerbates the anxiety she feels in seeing him upset. He knows that if he can cause her enough discomfort, she will eventually give him what he wants in order to reduce her own anxiety.

Children tend to use Emotional Blackmail with parents who find it difficult to tolerate emotional discontent in their child. Whether it comes in the form of sadness or harsh feelings, parents who are most vulnerable to Emotional Blackmail are those who have

trouble distancing themselves from their child's emotional displays. Children are very quick to pick up on this vulnerability, and they become adept at using it to their advantage when they are not getting what they want. Emotional Blackmail is a powerful tactic designed to pressure you, the parent, by ratcheting up your own discomfort.

To combat this tactic, you first need to realize that taking too much responsibility for your child's emotional outbursts weakens your position. Your own sensitivity can be used against you.

Besides, children can embellish and even fake emotions. This is not to say that your child's sadness is not genuine. She may truly feel sad. But when a child is emotionally invested in getting what she wants, a parent must question the sincerity of an emotional display. More often than not, when your child is upset with a limit or boundary that you have set, her anger or sadness is on display to manipulate you rather than to secure nurturance.

You must also keep in mind that you will never be able to completely protect your child from feeling anger or sadness. It's a part of life. Your job as a responsible parent is to make decisions that keep your child safe and ensure her best interests, even if it means she is upset by your choices. In addition, setting these limits now will allow your child to strengthen her ability to cope with the strong emotions generated from not getting her way.

[COUNTERMEASURES]

The first step in neutralizing Emotional Blackmail is to avoid taking responsibility for your child's *assertions about her feelings*. This may at first seem harsh, but it is sound advice. Your child will inevitably be sad or angry at many moments throughout her life, and in the case of Emotional Blackmail, you will be unable to change your child's feelings of anger, sadness, or grief without giving in to her manipulation. But if you do give in, you are only making your job harder (and her behavior worse) in the long run because you are teaching your child that her Tool of Power really works. This will only encourage her to use it again.

In the example above, Mother might have responded by saying, "I'm sorry. I know you're upset, but you need to do your homework before you watch television." Be prepared. Children who use this Tool of Power best are fully aware on an instinctual level that any empathetic statement like this may come from the parent's desire to smooth things over. And this is precisely what the child doesn't want. Therefore, you may get a response like "You're not sorry. You don't care. If you did, you'd let me watch the show."

I don't want to devalue what you go through emotionally during such encounters. It is painful to hear your child say something like "I hate you." But bear in mind that your child is trying to manipulate you. The H word is not a true indication of her feelings

about you, and in fact, your child is oblivious to how much her statement hurts you. She is using anger or sadness simply because she has learned from prior experience that it works. It is up to you to prove her wrong.

The second step in responding to Emotional Blackmail is to *stick to your guns*. Work on developing the skill of presenting yourself to your child as if you are unaffected and unmoved by his remarks. Consider the example above. Mother might respond to Devin by stating: “I understand that you think I’m ruining your life by making you do your homework, but you still need to do it before you watch television.” This is the only way to curtail the hurtful outbursts. Experience shows that those parents who are able to maintain poise and composure notice a correlation between their nonresponsiveness and their child’s decreased use of Emotional Blackmail as a Tool of Power. Your consistency will cause him to abandon an ineffective tool, and he will be forced to try another tactic. And since he’s a clever child, he will indeed find a tactic that will work— that is, until you, the aware parent, recognize and neutralize it.

Divide and Conquer

Divide and Conquer is the very familiar strategy with which your child attempts to get what he wants by exploiting weaknesses in your relationship with your spouse. Divide and Conquer comes in two forms. In the first form, your child takes advantage of poor communication between you and your spouse. In the second form, your child attempts to use a difference of opinion between you and your spouse to his advantage.

A child's attempt to exploit the lack of communication between you and your spouse is the most common form of Divide and Conquer. Your child understands which parent is most likely to give him what he wants, and when communication between parents is strained, the child uses that to his advantage. Jared is a sixteen-year-old I have worked with who is the personification of Divide and Conquer.

Jared came to see me because of what his parents called "an anger issue." Jared was prone to angry outbursts in which he swore at his parents, and he never did what they asked. In my office I had the opportunity to see Jared in action. It was early on in treatment, and his parents had come in to discuss their frustration. This is how the scene unfolded:

JARED (to me): I don't see why they have to come in with me. This is supposed to be my therapy.

FATHER: You know why we're here.

ME: Why are you here?

FATHER: Well, Jared went out with his friends Friday to a concert that I specifically told him I wasn't sure about.

JARED: But you weren't home.

FATHER: Jared . . . That doesn't matter. You knew I was going to look into it.

JARED: Yeah, but you weren't home, so I asked Mom.

FATHER: Jared, that's bullshit. The only reason you asked your mom was because you knew we hadn't discussed it.

MOTHER: Larry, there's no need to swear.

FATHER: No need to swear? There's no need to undermine me when I told him I'd look into it.

MOTHER: And I'm supposed to know that the two of you had this talk? Nobody told me.

FATHER: You could have called and asked.

MOTHER: But how was I supposed to know that you wanted me to call you?

FATHER: He knew!

ME (looking at Dad): So you told Jared you would give him an answer later, and (looking at Mom) you had no idea that they had talked about the concert.

MOTHER: No.

ME: Jared, why didn't you call your dad if you knew he was going to give you an answer?

JARED: He was at work.

ME: Okay, but why didn't you just call him?

JARED: Because my friends were over and they wanted to go.

ME: So you asked your mom instead of your dad?

JARED: Yeah.

ME: What do you think your dad would have said if you called him?

JARED: I don't know. He was at work.

ME: Your mom?

JARED: She doesn't care. She just wants to know where I'm going.

FATHER (looks at me): Exactly . . . Did you hear that? He knows she doesn't care. That's why he asked her.

Jared's father finally understood. And after further discussion, so did everyone else. Jared didn't want to admit it, but he knew we were on to his game.

Jared knew which parent would give him the answer he wanted. And he also knew that his mother would not think to call his father. This was a constant in their relationship. But it was soon after this meeting that both Jared's mother and father made it a point to work on improving their communication.

In the second form of Divide and Conquer, when your child exploits a difference of opinion between you and your spouse, he will take the side of the parent who is most likely to give him what he wants. In the example above, Jared reported that his mother was more amenable to letting him go places with his friends. If he were to have employed this second form of Divide and Conquer, he might have stroked his mother with a statement like, "Thank you for understanding, Mom. Dad's too strict." Jared was sensitive enough to avoid using this tactic in our session. His father's reaction would have likely been explosive. But this tactic can be very effective.

Families who don't communicate are often victims of this tactic, and divorced parents are particularly susceptible to it because of the physical separation. Children are very quick to pick up on breaks in the family dynamics that they can use to their advantage. It is an opportunity that is too convenient for some children to resist.

[COUNTERMEASURES]

The countermeasure to Divide and Conquer requires two steps. They are, first, nurturing a clear and consistent communication with your spouse and, second, dealing out consequences. There is a third suggestion I will also offer.

Divide and Conquer is only effective when there is a breakdown in communication. To avoid being manipulated by this tool, you must work on that communication. Parents often point out that it is impossible to discuss every little thing that comes up. And I agree. Luckily there is a way around this dilemma.

I tell parents in my practice that they should do two things to avoid becoming Divided and Conquered. They must first sit down and discuss the types of decisions they want to

share. Jared's father wanted to be involved in the decision about where his son could go on weekends. It would be a good idea to make lists of the types of decisions that you want to share. Besides where the child gets to go, you might want to have a say in how much money you spend on purchases for him or whether or not he can have a sleepover—all potentially contentious issues.

After reviewing both of your lists, you may choose to modify them. When you feel comfortable that both lists are complete, combine them into one list. After composing your list, make a pact that you will always consult each other before deciding on the issues on the list.

Second, don't be afraid to tell your child, "Let me think about it." What seems urgent to your child need not be urgent for you. If your child pleads that time is of the essence, then she simply hasn't planned effectively. She hasn't given you ample time to make a decision. But remember, it is still the parents who make the decisions. Tell her you have to think about it, then honor the pact and check with your spouse.

Delivering consequences is also important. Although Divide and Conquer is quite different from Covert Operations, the two share a common feature: They both are damaging to mutual trust. Jared circumvented his father and went straight to his mother because he knew she would give him the answer he wanted. As a result, the father felt both undermined and betrayed.

Because of the damage that Divide and Conquer inflicts on relationships, I suggest that any consequence be restorative in nature. As we discussed in the last chapter, restoration is the process by which your child performs a behavior that is designed to restore the damage done by his attempts at manipulation. Keep in mind that any restorative consequence is given in addition to a consequence for the original inappropriate behavior. In the case of Jared, his parents should provide a consequence for his going to the concert without his father's permission (the original inappropriate behavior) and an additional consequence for his decision to use Divide and Conquer.

Providing a predictable consequence for his manipulation makes the child aware of the risk at hand should he choose to employ Divide and Conquer. In Jared's case, he now has to have permission from both parents before he acts. This is the consequence of his playing one parent against the other.

In conclusion, consider the fact that your child is manipulating by exploiting a weakness in your relationship with your partner. Parents often feel that they are to blame for these types of problems because they have failed to communicate effectively. In addition, the parent who told the child she could have what she wanted is likely to feel uneasy about imposing consequences. These are understandable reactions, but they do not excuse your child from behaving inappropriately. She knows what she is doing. And when she chooses to use this Tool of Power, she places a higher priority on getting what she wants than she does on honoring the relationship that you share with your spouse or co-parent. Keep that in mind. Just because you failed to communicate with your spouse or told your

child she could have what she wanted doesn't mean your child is innocent. Understand this and follow through with the two steps I have laid out above.

Parenting is a team responsibility.

Playing the Victim

When your child tries to get what she wants by making you feel sorry for her, she is Playing the Victim. Children can achieve this goal by simply acting unhappy. Or they can resort to asserting that you have cheated them or let them down in some way.

Regardless of the method, your child may present herself as feeling sad, frustrated, or angry in an attempt to persuade you to give her what she wants. In addition, she will do the best she can to make you believe that the only way she will feel better is if you allow her to have her way.

Lauren was a twelve-year-old girl in my practice who was a master at making her mother, Anne, feel sorry for her. Lauren's parents had been divorced for a year, and her mother was very sensitive to her daughter's anxiety over the breakup of the family. Anne was particularly affected by the fact that her own parents had divorced when she was about Lauren's age. Even though her divorce from Lauren's father was amicable, Anne often wondered if Lauren felt the same deep pain that she had felt when her mother divorced her abusive alcoholic father.

Here is a scene that unfolded between the mother and the daughter.

LAUREN: I want a new bedroom set.

ANNE (looking at me): She's been talking about this all week long. Her friend Zoe just got a new queen-size bed, and now all Lauren can think of is getting a bigger bed.

LAUREN: I haven't been talking about it all week.

ANNE: Really?

LAUREN: Well, that's just because I'm still sleeping in the same bed I got when we moved into the house.

ANNE: And what's wrong with that?

LAUREN: You mean besides the fact that I can barely fit into it anymore?

ANNE: Lauren, the bed fits you fine. You just want a new bed.

LAUREN: Dad picked that bed out, Mom. I never wanted it. And now every time I have to sleep in it, I have to think of him.

(BOTH Anne and Lauren are silent.)

ME: What do you think about when you think of your dad?

LAUREN: That he's not there anymore.

ANNE: Sweetie, he still loves you.

LAUREN: I know, Mom, but can I just have a new bed?

It was obvious that Lauren was exploiting Anne's concern for her feelings in order to get a new bed. The truth is that she really did miss her father, but her attempted manipulation of her mother made it difficult for the mother to trust the genuineness of her sadness. I coached Lauren's mother to trust her daughter's emotion when she was not emotionally invested in getting her way. That seemed to help.

Playing the Victim can be demonstrated through the fabrication of emotion (your child faking sadness or anger), or it can revolve around real-life events. But it is invariably designed to lure you into the child's emotional state so that you will give the child her way.

[COUNTERMEASURES]

The countermeasure to Playing the Victim is easier said than done. The rule to follow here is to separate the emotional content from whatever short-term goal the child is trying to obtain. Provide empathy, understanding, and nurturance, but withhold the desired reward. Every parent feels empathy for her child. Seeing your child in pain may be one of the most difficult things you will face. Nevertheless, it is imperative that you, the parent, muster the strength to refrain from giving in to your child when you know it is not the right thing to do, no matter how bad you feel for her.

Empathy is the best thing you can offer your child—better than a new bed, a video game, or a sleepover.

It is hard to remain focused on your goal when your child begins Playing the Victim—hard emotional work. But remember that your vulnerability is one of the key reasons that your child Plays the Victim. Your child knows how much you love her and that you cannot bear to see her in pain. Lauren clearly understood this.

If Lauren's mother were to have followed my advice, she would have responded as follows.

ANNE: Does it really upset you that Dad's not around?

LAUREN: Yes . . . That's why I want a new bed.

ANNE: Well, wait a minute . . . We can discuss the bed in a minute. Let's talk about your feelings first.

LAUREN: No, Mom. I don't want to talk about my feelings. I just want a new bed.

ANNE: But a new bed is not going to solve the problem. If you are upset about your father, I want you to be able to talk about it.

By responding in this manner, Lauren's mother would have been able to separate Lauren's feelings over her father from her desire to have a new bed. She would have then been able to address the feelings and provide empathy for Lauren if she were truly feeling sad. Unfortunately, because Lauren was likely using these feelings to get a bed by Playing the Victim, she would have become frustrated and continued to pressure her mother for the bed. Lauren's mother could have responded by saying, "We are not going to get a new bed right now. But if you wish to discuss your feelings, I am here for you."

In summary, when your child is emotionally invested in getting her way, you should use caution before blindly accepting assertions or actions regarding the way she feels.

Express empathy but help your child separate her feelings from her goal. The new bed and the loss of the father are distinct issues that have been conflated in Lauren's mind.

You are the adult. You are in charge of separating out emotions and practical action.

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