



**BOUNDLESS ABA**

# **THE COERCIVE CYCLE**

**Family Resource**

# BREAKING THE "TUG-OF-WAR"

## How to Get Out of Power Struggles with Your Child

Have you ever felt like you're in a constant battle with your child? You ask them to do something, and they refuse, leading to yelling, arguing, or you just giving in? This is a common pattern called the "coercive cycle," and it's like a tug-of-war where nobody wins. This handout will help you understand this cycle and learn ways to break free from it, making your home life much calmer.

### What is the Coercive Cycle?



It's a cycle because your child's behavior "coerces" or forces you to react in a certain way, and your reaction accidentally makes their bad behavior stronger.

## Real Life Examples

### The Coercive Cycle in Action

Imagine a typical evening at home:

#### Example 1: Bedtime Battle

1. Parent Makes a Demand: "Okay, sweetie, it's 8 o'clock, time to put on your pajamas."
2. Child Resists: "No! I want to keep playing!" (Child might whine, cry, or run away).
3. Parent Reacts (Negative Escalation):
  - Option A (Giving In): "Oh, alright, just five more minutes." (Child learns resistance works to delay bedtime).
  - Option B (Angry Reaction): "I said NOW! You're going to bed this instant, or you'll lose screen time tomorrow!" (Child complies out of fear, not understanding the value of following instructions).
4. Child Temporarily Stops (for the wrong reason):
  - Option A: Child gets more playtime.
  - Option B: Child reluctantly gets ready, feeling resentful or scared.
5. Cycle Repeats: The next night, the child is likely to resist bedtime again, remembering that it led to more playtime or a strong reaction from the parent.

#### Example 2: Cleaning Up Toys

1. Parent Makes a Demand: "It's time to clean up your toys now, please."
2. Child Resists: "I don't want to! It's too much!" (Child might throw toys, lie on the floor, or ignore the request).
3. Parent Reacts (Negative Escalation):
  - Option A (Doing it for them): "Fine, I'll just do it myself." (Child learns they don't have to take responsibility).
  - Option B (Threatening): "If you don't clean up right now, you won't get dessert!" (Child might comply begrudgingly, but the focus is on avoiding punishment, not on cooperation).
4. Child Temporarily Stops (for the wrong reason):
  - Option A: Toys get cleaned, but the child hasn't learned to clean up.
  - Option B: Child cleans up to avoid losing dessert.
5. Cycle Repeats: The next time cleanup is needed, the child may resist again, expecting the parent to give in or threaten a consequence.



# HOW TO BREAK THE CYCLE (AND WIN THE TUG-OF-WAR)

**Choose your battles:** Not every request is worth a major power struggle. Decide what is truly important and let go of minor things. This reduces opportunities for the cycle to start.

**Be clear and simple:** Tell your child exactly what you want them to do, in a way they can understand. Avoid vague instructions or asking too many things at once.

**Give time to respond:** Sometimes children need a moment to process a request. Avoid immediately repeating yourself or getting impatient.

**Praise good behaviors:** Instead of focusing on what you don't want your child to do, focus on what you do want to see. Praise and reward cooperation and positive behavior. Even small steps in the right direction deserve recognition. (e.g., "Thank you for putting on one shoe!")

**Stay Calm:** Your own emotional response plays a big role. When you stay calm, it's less likely to fuel the cycle. If you feel yourself getting frustrated, take a deep breath or a short break if possible.

**CHOOSE YOUR BATTLES**

**BE CLEAR AND SIMPLE**

**GIVE TIME TO RESPOND**

**FOLLOW THROUGH**

**PRAISE GOOD BEHAVIOR**

**IGNORE BAD BEHAVIORS**

**TEACH NEW BEHAVIORS**

**STAY CALM**

**BUILD POSITIVE INTERACTIONS**

**Teach new behaviors:** If your child is resisting because they don't know how to do something, teach them the skill in a supportive way. If they are resisting to avoid something unpleasant, help them understand the benefits of cooperation.

**Follow through with demands being placed and choices given:**

If you say there will be a consequence, make sure you are willing to enforce it. The same goes with choices. Only give choices you are okay with following through with.

**Ignore bad behaviors:** If they're just whining or complaining but it's not going to cause harm to them, others or their environment, don't give them attention for it.

**Build Positive Interactions:** Make time for fun and connection with your child when there are no demands being made. This builds a stronger relationship and makes them more likely to cooperate.



## Real Life Examples

### Break the Cycle

Imagine a typical evening at home:

#### Example 1: Bedtime

Responding differently to break the cycle:

1. Parent Makes a Demand: "It's time for bed!"
2. Child Resists: (Whines) "No! I want to keep playing!"
3. Parent Reacts (Breaking the Cycle):
  - Option A (Providing Warning/Transition): "Okay, sweetie, in five minutes, it will be time to put on your pajamas. We'll finish this page of the book first."
  - Option B (Acknowledging Feelings/Choice): "I hear you. You're having fun playing, and it's hard to stop. But it's almost bedtime, and we need to get enough sleep so you feel good tomorrow." Then, offer a small choice: "Let's finish this page, and then you can choose if you want to walk to your room, or do you want me to carry you?"
4. Child Temporarily Stops (with guidance): Child may still whine initially but is given a warning and a choice.
5. Cycle Shifts (with consistency): Over time, the child learns that bedtime happens, but their feelings are heard, and they have some control. Parent follows through with praise: "Great job getting your pajamas on!"



#### Example 2: Cleaning Up Toys

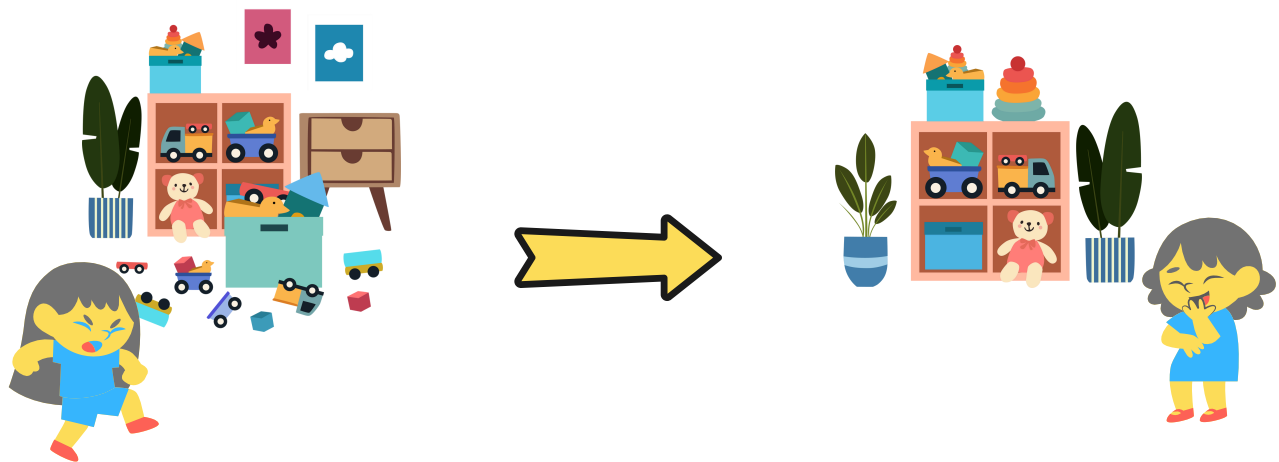
Let's try approaching the situation to break the cycle before it begins:

1. Parent Makes a Demand: "It's time to clean up your toys now, please."
2. Child Resists: "I don't want to! It's too much!" (Child might throw toys, lie on the floor, or ignore the request).
3. Parent Reacts (Negative Escalation):
  - Option A (Doing it for them): "Fine, I'll just do it myself." (Child learns they don't have to take responsibility).
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## Key Differences in Breaking the Cycle

- **Proactive Strategies:** Providing warnings, breaking down tasks, offering small choices.
- **Calm and Consistent Responses:** Avoiding emotional escalation or giving in to resistance.
- **Focus on Positive Reinforcement:** Highlighting and rewarding cooperation, even in small steps.
- **Clear Expectations and Consequences:** Making expectations known and following through calmly when necessary.
- **Teaching Skills:** Helping the child learn how to comply rather than just demanding compliance.



By consistently using these strategies, you can gradually shift the dynamic and teach your child that cooperation and communication are more effective ways to interact than resistance and challenging behaviors. Remember, it takes time and patience to break a well-established cycle. Be kind to yourself and celebrate small victories along the way!

# Practice Assignment: Building Better Moments



This week, let's focus on making tricky moments with your child smoother.

**Your Goal: Pick 1-2 common tense situations:**

- Getting ready to leave
- Starting chores
- Transitioning activities
- When you say "no"

**Short-term:**

**Increase awareness of interaction patterns.**

**Long-term: Develop strategies to reduce conflict and increase cooperation.**

## Here's what to do:

### 1. Notice the Pattern (Observe): When it happens, watch:

- What did you ask?
- How did your child react? (any delay?)
- What did you do next?
- Was the result calm or stressful?
- **Jot down keywords to remember.**

### 2. Try One Small Shift: Next time, change one thing:

- Heads-up: Give a 1-2 minute warning ("Shoes in 2 minutes").
- Softer start: Try a gentle approach ("What's first?").
- Catch 'em good: Praise any cooperation ("Thanks for socks!").
- Deep breath: If frustrated, take a slow breath.

### 3. See What Happens (Observe): Notice any changes:

- How did it feel?
- Did your child change?
- Did your reaction change?

No pressure! Just observe and try one tweak.

We'll discuss your observations next time! What was easy/hard/surprising?



## SHORT TERM - PARENT GOALS

**Identify Coercive Patterns:** "The parent will accurately identify the components of the coercive cycle (demand, child resists, parent reacts, child stops, cycle repeats) in 80% of observed interactions across 2 sessions."

01

**Implement One New Strategy:** "When presented with a previously identified trigger situation, the parent will implement one of the learned cycle-breaking strategies (e.g., giving a warning, using a softer start, praising cooperation) in 75% of opportunities across 3 sessions."

02

**Reduce Angry Reactions:** "The parent will decrease their use of angry reactions (yelling, threats) in response to child's resistance by 25% across 3 sessions, as measured by observation or self-report."

03





## LONG TERM - PARENT GOALS

**Consistent Use of Strategies:** "The parent will consistently use cycle-breaking strategies in at least 80% of identified trigger situations across 4 weeks."

01

**Increase Positive Interactions:** "The parent will increase the frequency of positive interactions with their child (e.g., praise, play) by 20% across 4 weeks, as measured by a log or observation."

02

**Generalization Across Settings:** "The parent will demonstrate the ability to implement cycle-breaking strategies in multiple settings (home, public) with 70% consistency across 2 weeks."

03

