

## Tenet #12: No One Wins a Power Struggle.

### The Deeper Cut:

Principal Vernon had finally managed to get the library door to stay open when Bender piped in.

Bender (sarcastically): "That's very clever sir, but what if there's a fire? I think violating fire codes and endangering the lives of children would be unwise at this juncture in your career, sir."

Vernon (embarrassed): "All right, get this out of here. What's wrong with you? You're not fooling anybody, Bender! The next screw that falls out is gonna be you!"

Bender (under his breath): "Eat my shorts."

Vernon (shocked): "What was that?"

Bender (enunciating clearly): "Eat. My. Shorts."

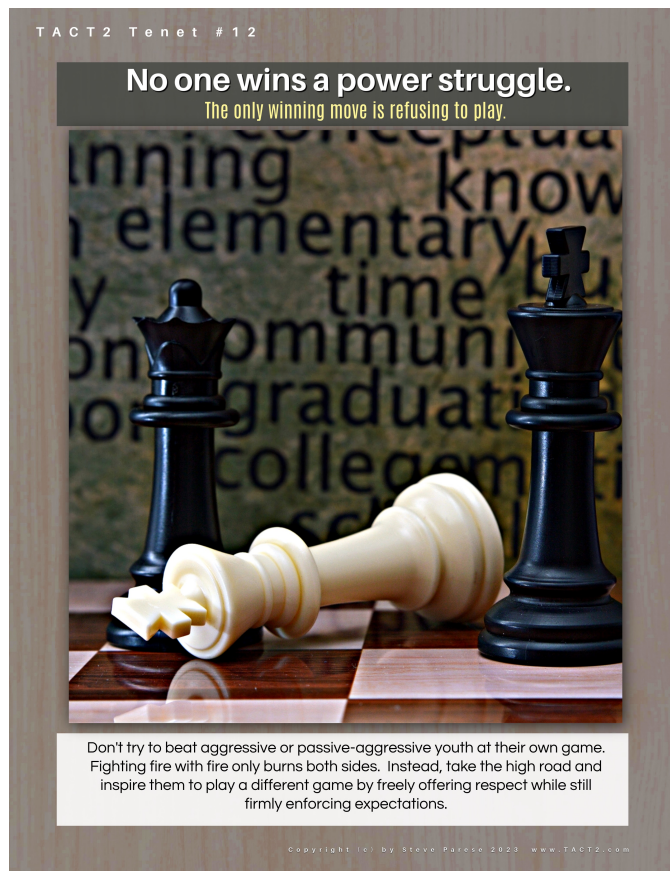
Vernon (furious): "You just bought yourself another Saturday, mister!"

Bender (glaring): "Well, I'm free the Saturday after that. Beyond that, I'm gonna have to check my calendar!"

Vernon (enraged): "Good! 'Cause it's gonna be filled! We'll keep going! You want another one? Say the word, just say the word! Instead of going to prison, you'll come here! I'm doing society a favor here! Are you through?"

This scene from John Hughes' The Breakfast Club (1985) is still one of the best film examples of an out-of-control power struggle between a teen and an authority figure.

Principal Vernon was absolutely correct to address the closed library door, and he was absolutely right when he pinned it on Bender. But he addressed the problem in the absolute wrong way. He let his anger and arrogance dictate his words and actions, rather than confronting this situation clearly, calmly, and professionally.



### The Lure of the Power Struggle

Setting and enforcing reasonable rules is essential when working with challenging kids. But effectively addressing behavior problems is not easy, especially when children are surrounded by peers. Kids often push back when their behavior is confronted. They become disrespectful, defiant, and destructive, trying to distract us with accusations of unfairness and challenges to our authority.

It's tempting to fight their fire with fire of your own, to give them a taste of their own medicine. "Two can play that game!" we think, but it's a losing game all around. If we win, we've verbally or physically bullied a child. If we lose, we look and feel even more foolish. Right, Mr. Vernon?

### Resisting Power Struggles

The only way to win this childish game is to refuse to play. "When I was a child, I talked like

a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I set aside childish ways." (I Corinthians, 13:11). Good advice.

Consider the following strategies for staying out of power struggles in non-dangerous situations. Which of these do you already use?

√ Lower your tone. A lower-pitched tone of voice is less likely to provoke a reaction. Project your voice from your core, not high in your throat — it communicates authority without being threatening. Avoid anger or sarcasm that will only provoke defensiveness.

√ Check your body language. Stay alert, but relax your body to appear less aggressive. Maintain a distance of 5-6 feet, and turn your body slightly to the side. Avoid angry facial expressions or gestures, and be careful about standing over the youth.

√ Refocus on the issue. Don't get distracted by defending your decision against accusations of favoritism or bias. Calmly refuse to engage: "We're not going there" or "I won't argue with you." Then restate your request as simple as possible.

√ Let other staff assist. Power struggles can easily devolve into winner-takes-all competitions. Ask for or allow other staff to step in and persuade the youth to comply. This is teamwork, not weakness.

√ Allow the youth to save face. Let them have the last word to save their pride. Ignore that final gesture of disrespect without re-engaging them. If needed, you can always give additional consequences later when there's no audience, but not now.

## The Breakfast Club, Take Two

Principal Vernon had finally managed to get the library door to stay open when Bender piped in.

Bender (sarcastically): "That's very clever sir, but what if there's a fire? I think violating fire codes and endangering the lives of children would be unwise at this juncture in your career, sir."

Vernon (to himself): 'Son of a b—. He's right. This clearly isn't going to work.'

Vernon (aloud): "You may have a point, Mr. Bender. May I see you in the hallway for a moment?"

Bender (mocking): "I think I'm fine right here, sir. I wouldn't want to take up any more of your valuable time today."

Vernon (firmly as he leaves): "I'll see you in the hall."

Bender (slowly getting up): "If you insist..."

In the hallway.

Vernon (firmly): "Thank you Mr. Bender. I think we BOTH know why the library door isn't working."

Bender (innocently): "I think a screw fell out."

Vernon: "Uh-huh. But with the door shut, I can't supervise you kids from my office. So here's the deal: You have 10 minutes to figure out how to keep that door open. If not, I'll bring my paperwork and spend the rest of the day in there with you. Your choice. I'll check back with you in ten."

Summary: Many everyday problems are deliberate rather than the result of some emotional trauma. Avoid a public setting when addressing these behaviors. Watch out for your anger traps, and refuse to engage in a back-and-forth power struggle.

Instead, use a calm, no-nonsense voice to identify the issue and offer a choice: cooperate and avoid consequences, or refuse and face the repercussions.

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