

**PARENTING YOUR
POWERFUL
CHILD**

Bringing an End to the
Everyday Battles

Dr. Kevin Leman



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*To the entire Leman family—
each of you a powerful force for the
good in your own unique way*

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Introduction

Is Your Kid Powering Up?

It's time to take the buzzard by the beak.

Every family has a powerful kid.

He's the one who flings himself in the door, demands the car keys, and then argues with you that his trip to his buddy's to practice basketball is more important than your trip to the grocery store.

She's the one who, at 2 years old, stomped her foot and said, "Do it by self."

He's the one who drags his feet and can't find things as you're trying to get him out the door to school so you can go to work.

She's the one the principal calls about, because she's been caught writing unacceptable emails.

He's the one who says he'll take out the trash but never manages to do it.

She's the one who disses you at Target, then expects you to buy her the hottest new shirt.

He's the one who talks back, no matter what you say.

She's the one you sigh over at night.

He's the one you worry about when it's 1:00 a.m. and he still hasn't checked in.

She's the one who's so sensitive that the entire family walks on eggshells around her.

He's the one who's even more stubborn than you are.

Do any of these sound familiar?

If so, you of all people can understand that there's a reason some animal mothers eat their young.

Power can come from a lot of places and can look different in the ways it plays out, but the effect on the child, you, and your entire family is the same. Here's what I mean.

**There's a reason
some animal
mothers eat
their young.**

When my kids were little—I have five of them, spread across a wide age gap—I loved making even the shortest car trips fun. It helped that my kids were young enough to be gullible. For example, when we'd drive up to a red light, I'd lean over and give a little *puff*, and the light would magically change to green. The kids were amazed at the power of their dad. Of course, they didn't know that I'd been watching the light from the perpendicular direction change to yellow, so I knew ours would become green at that very instant.

On those car trips, we'd frequently pass by a power plant in Tucson, Arizona. The first time, the kids asked, "Oh, Dad, what's that?"

"The hamburger factory," I quipped.

"Oooohh," they said in unison awe.

They called it that for a long time.

You see how much power parents have?

But so did that power plant. It wasn't very big, but wow, look at all the houses, businesses, and streetlights that were powered by that seemingly small unit!

It's the same with your powerful child. He—no matter what age or stage—is powerfully affecting much more than you think. He's the child who is orchestrating your entire household by his antics—or the fear of his antics. She's the one who so frustrates you that you take it out on other family members because you don't want to face a blowout with her. It's simply too exhausting. So that powerful 2-year-old, 5-year-old, 8-year-old, 11-year-old, 15-year-old, or 19-year-old is controlling all your family as a result.

That's why *now* is the time to take your buzzard by the beak—to take those power surges and transform them into positive urges. After all, power plays only continue when they're working.

But what if that innate power could be redirected to develop your child's natural talents? To help him stand firm against peer pressure in the most crucial years?

To give back to the family not grudgingly but with a smile? To make a difference in your community? Think

**Power plays only continue
when they're working.**

of all that power causing you grief and frustration being harnessed for the good. You'll be amazed at what your child can accomplish!

Someday you're going to spend a lot of time picking out the dress or tux you'll wear to that child's wedding. I know you'll look wonderful in it. But better than that, you're going to say to yourself with great satisfaction, "I did my job well as a parent, didn't I?"

That's because you, parent, are smart. You did the things you had to do, even when you were frustrated, angry, and annoyed, your back was against the wall, and the chips were down. You hung in there. That's because you were convinced that your child

was worth the effort, no matter what others felt or said to the contrary.

You never know who could be in your home right now. The very child demanding a drink of water and a bedtime story as you try to read this book could be the next president of the United States, set to manage multiple tasks. The one you have to coax to interact with others and who prefers to stay in his room might be the next Bill Gates, set to change computer technology as we know it. The one who argues with you nonstop might someday be a state attorney. The kid who thought he could fly off your roof—even though you warned him that all that goes up must come down—might be the next Albert Einstein. The sassy child who is always challenging the system might be the next Rosa Parks. The kid who mixed chemicals in your garage—even when you told him not to—and blew out the garage door might be the one who discovers an entirely new form of environment-friendly fuel. And the child who is always spelunking in mud, sticking poison oak sprigs in his pocket (you know because you got the blistering rash when you did his laundry), and leaving streaks of manure from the neighbor's garden he blew through on the way to your kitchen might be the one who discovers the cure to cancer.

Think of all the energy you have harnessed in your very own power plant—and what it might mean someday.

Parenting Your Powerful Child reveals:

- who your powerful child is (it may not be the one you think).
- why she does what she does.
- what genes and environment have to do with it.
- his own personal screenplay on life (a key to resolving those behaviors that drive you nuts).
- her goals behind the scenes.

It'll help you:

- understand your powerful child like you never have before.
- talk to your child in a language that works for both of you.
- redirect his power surges into something that positively impacts all around him.
- meet her needs for belonging and unconditional acceptance.
- give you the long view you need as a parent in the trenches.

I guarantee it.

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The Anatomy of a Powerful Child

*Powerful kids don't just happen;
they're created.*

Imagine you are sitting at a baseball game. The batter goes berserk when he strikes out for the third time. After smacking the ground with his bat a couple times, he slings it—and hits one of his own teammates in the dugout.

What's the reaction of the crowd? Stunned silence.

There's an old ad for the stock brokerage firm E. F. Hutton & Co. that claims, "When E. F. Hutton talks, everyone listens." That's the way it is with powerful people. When they talk, people listen.

Let's say you were having a conversation, and all of a sudden the person you're talking to starts screaming. How would you react? You'd probably drop your jaw in shock if you were unused to such behavior from that person. But if it was the norm, you might respond differently.

You might take it, fight back, or sigh and hope that person will get the barrage of words and attitude over with quickly and then go away.

An adult who throws a temper tantrum at home or work, a teenager who has to have things his way all the time, an 8-year-old who throws a baseball bat, a 3-year-old who refuses to go potty—all these are examples of powerful people. There are a lot of ways to be powerful. Some are easy to spot because they are overly demonstrative, such as the berserk batter. But those who use subtle control are just as manipulative and powerful.

It Starts in the High Chair

Take, for instance, the 17-month-old boy who refuses to eat, whether it's Beech-Nut baby food or home-pureed broccoli. So what do we parents do? We get creative.

“Open up the hangar, because the plane is about to land!” We make fools of ourselves, circling the food around like a jet plane and trying to zoom it into the kid's open mouth.

What happens? The kid isn't stupid. He opens his mouth to play the game. But as soon as that spoon gets close, what does he do? He shuts his mouth, and the food splatters all over the high chair tray. You can even see it in his eyes: *You're not going to get me to eat that stuff. Never. Nuh-uh.*

So the well-meaning parent actually creates power struggles with that child from an early age.

You lift up your 15-month-old daughter's bottom to put Pampers on her, realize you're missing that wonderful-smelling baby powder, and tell her to stay put. You come back into the room a minute later, and where is she? MIA. You find her hiding behind the couch, capture her, and carry her back to the diaper-changing station in her bedroom.

You spend the next five exasperating minutes wrestling her as she squirms, trying to get the tabs aligned on the diaper so they'll hold.

What is your daughter saying? "You're not going to tell me what to do. I'm my own person."

At a very early age, children can start to have perfectionistic tendencies. They have to sit in the same chair at the dinner table. Their stuffed animals have to be lined up just so, or they can't sleep. You have to make macaroni and cheese exactly the same way every time, since any deviation can upset their world.

At a very early age, children can start to have perfectionistic tendencies.

Consider this scenario. Twenty-one-month-old Buford is sitting in his high chair, ready for lunch.

"There you go," you say and deliver his sandwich on his favorite Clifford the Red Dog melamine plate, complete with a matching bowl of Goldfish crackers.

Then as you step one foot away, ready to prepare your own lunch—because of course you think of your child first—the meltdown begins. He starts crying and then screams. He bangs his head on the tray of the high chair and the food scatters across your linoleum floor. What on earth?

After picking up the food from the floor, you put it back on his favorite plate and hand it to him again with a smile. *Maybe he's just tired and needs a nap*, you think. But he hasn't shown any signs of being tired before now.

He takes one look, narrows his eyes, shoves the food onto the floor for round two, and starts screaming again.

Then it hits you. Usually you cut the crusts off his bread and cut his sandwich into four little triangles. Today you were in a rush, so you forgot.

You whisk the sandwich off the floor, since in your house you believe in the two-second rule. If it's only been on the floor for two seconds each time, it's still edible. Whipping out a knife, you cut off the crusts, trim the sandwich into neat little triangles, and position it per usual on his plate.

This time when you bring it to little Buford, the kid is smiling ear to ear. He has triangles. Life is good.

What happened here? By always trimming the kid's sandwich into perfect shapes, you're saying, "You can have life exactly like you want it."

But is every one of your days predictable? Does life give you exactly what you want when you want it? Then why would you paint that picture for your child?

She's Got Your Number

Consider another scenario.

Your 6-year-old insists she has to have a certain toy. All the other kids in her kindergarten have one.

"No, I'm not going to buy you that," you say.

Twenty minutes later, not only has she continually barraged you with her request, but you've discovered that the meal you were trying to throw together to make your hungry hubby happy is missing a key ingredient—his favorite barbecue sauce. You were at the grocery store yesterday and bought an alternate brand, but you know how picky he can be. So you load the kid up in the car and drive to the Super Target to get the special sauce.

What happens along the way in the cart?

You wear down.

"Okay," you finally agree, "we'll go to the toy aisle and look."

Three minutes later, the toy is in the cart with your happy daughter hugging it.

“That’s the last toy I’m buying you for life,” you say as you head to the checkout aisle.

Notice what has happened.

Twenty minutes earlier, you told the kid, “I’m not buying you anything.”

Now, if you look at the receipt, you see a line item: “Toy . . . \$19.99.”

You actually bought the stupid thing that you know she’ll be tired of within a week.

So what have you taught your powerful child? If she reads you right, she’ll know when you’re at your lowest emotionally. That’s the best time to hit you again and keep hitting you. If she works hard, she has a good chance of pulling off what she wants.

What’s your child thinking? *Hey, this works. If I keep asking and don’t give up, I’ll get what I want.*

That’s how a powerful kid works. She uses everyday life instances to work you in such a way that you give in—because sometimes giving in is easier.

Parents tell me all the time, “I know I shouldn’t do it, but sometimes I get so tired, I give in. It’s the constant pestering that wears me down. All I can think is, *Please shut up.*”

Powerful kids have your number; don’t think they don’t. Yes, it’s easier in the short run to give in. It shuts them up temporarily (until they want the next thing). But neither of you win with that strategy. You might gain a breather for an hour or two before the demands

What’s your child thinking?

Hey, this works. If I keep asking and don’t give up, I’ll get what I want.

begin again, but you set yourself up for the next situation. You've given your child more power—a deep-seated attitude that she has to win and additional confidence that she will win if she follows her plan.

In the long run, it would be better to put your pestering child in a room and let her howl at the moon all night when she doesn't get what she wants. The next morning, when she asks again for that toy, looking oh-so-pitiful with those red-rimmed eyes, you do the smart thing. You say, "No, I'm not getting you that toy," and you walk away to make breakfast for the entire family.

See how it works?

So take a look at your own powerful child. What five or six specific instances can you see from the recent past where, through powerful behavior, that child received what she wanted because you got worn down and gave in?

How did that influence your child's powerful techniques? Did it lessen them or ramp them up?

Ah, now you're getting it.

It Will Only Ramp Up from Here

All lessons in life aren't learned easily, and this is one that's better for your child to learn early: "You don't get what you want when you want it. The world doesn't revolve around you."

Kids who don't learn that grow to be powerful elementary school kids.

Like Samuel, who lorded it over everybody in his third-grade class until finally another powerful child got sick of it and said, "No! I'm not gonna do that. You're not the boss of me. You're so stuck-up. Nobody else likes you either." The boy's world crumbled

in that instant, because he'd never been told no, and he expected everybody to do what he wanted when he wanted it. And why wouldn't he? His parents and older sister had babied him and given him everything he wanted. He was in charge at home.

Kids who are powerful elementary school kids grow into even more powerful junior highers.

The junior high world can be a terribly cruel one, where boys compete in the physical realm to be number one and girls compete in the emotional realm to be part of the popular cliques. When I was in private practice, many of my clients were parents and their adolescent children, since those critical years can be tumultuous for both parent and child.

Gabriela, for example, had always sought attention. By eighth grade, she had climbed to the top of the food chain in her particular group. She was known for getting attention in all the wrong ways but somehow got away with it . . . until she pulled one power play too many. When she texted inappropriate comments that made fun of a girl outside her group and publicly shamed the girl at school, she got more than she bargained for. A week later, Gabriela's mom got a shocking call from an attorney, who informed her the girl's family was pressing harassment charges against Gabriela.

"At first I didn't believe it," Gabriela's mom tearfully said. "I knew my girl could never text messages like that. But then I saw them, and my eyes were opened to who my daughter had become."

Kids who are powerful junior highers grow into even more powerful high schoolers.

Janet was powerful and an attention-getter. She had to be the first of her group of friends to try anything. One night at her father's remote cabin, she and her friends had a party that combined

alcohol and synthetic drugs. Janet got dizzy and fell off her parents' high deck to the mountain path below. When she woke up in the hospital, she couldn't even remember how she'd been injured.

Sometimes, as I discovered in my private practice, the quiet children could be the most controlling. For example, at 8 years old, Shane was a quiet kid. But I could tell that he—not his parents—was clearly in charge of his home. His silence ran deep and lay heavy on the entire family. When Shane grew silent and retreated to his room, his mom constantly brought him things to try to make him happy. No matter what I said, she couldn't see that she was being manipulated. So year after year, she made it her goal to make her shy, “sensitive” son happy.

He paid her back for her efforts the day after he graduated from high school by leaving her a short note: *To Mom, who tried—and failed. I'm outta here.*

The emotional impact that note had on his mother was devastating, to say the least. Without intervention from God Almighty, she'll never recover.

I've shared the above two examples not to scare you but to emphasize the importance of making changes in your family dynamics *now*. Don't wait. Too much is at stake.

Powerful young kids become powerful junior highers, who become powerful high schoolers, who become powerful adults. Each time the ante of power is upped, the consequences of that power become more potentially life-changing.

A power-driven child who is 16 to 18 years of age is even more at risk, because he or she is driven to be in control and stay in control of life situations.

A teenage girl who feels powerless—as if her life is mapped out for her and she has no say over it—sometimes becomes anorexic or

bulimic. She may also become a cutter—inflicting cuts with razor blades on places on her body that are easy to hide with clothing, such as her stomach, arms, or legs. Anorexia, bulimia, and cutting help her feel in control of something when situations in her home or relationships with her family or peers are out of her control. But such behaviors are emotionally and physically devastating.

With a powerful teenage boy, the drive for power can lead to being reckless with the car. He might try to show how fearless and brave he is by passing a car on

a hill, not knowing what's coming over the other side. In reality, he's only being stupid. He might also create bravado by duking it out with somebody instead of finding a way to avoid a fight or confrontation.

Ask any boy or young man if he's ever been in a fistfight, and that gleam will appear in his eye. Most young men get into a fight at some time, because in the male world, boys continually compete for dominance. However, times have changed since my high school days, when somebody dared a guy to knock my lights out—and he did. Today's kids are armed with knives and guns, and you wouldn't want your child on either end of one of those. Curbing powerful, attention-getting behavior is critical at every stage.

If It Walks Like a Duck . . .

Let me state for the record that adolescents have been weird for centuries. They'll continue to be weird. They'll roll eyes, slam doors,

**Powerful young kids
become powerful
junior highers, who
become powerful
high schoolers,
who become
powerful adults.**

and talk in “never” and “always” extremes. All kids are prone to fling the “You never let me do anything” comment out at least a time or two . . . per day.

Parents who take those types of statements further to prove a point and “win” will never win. If they try, all they’ll succeed in doing is ramping up their kid’s power by teaching the kid how to become powerful. How to throw cheap shots.

**Adolescents
have been
weird for
centuries.**

“You ungrateful little snot! I sent you to a camp that costs \$750 for a week. How dare you say that!”

It’s a shot below the belt that may feel good to you momentarily (hey, we’re all human), but it changes how you interact with your child.

Instead of reacting to what your hormone-group child does, understand that she gets weird. When she hits pubescence and adolescence, hormones race around in her body. Since she doesn’t know what to do with those strange, new urges, she hits the people closest to her.

So the next time your powerful kid rolls her eyes, don’t take it personally. Say instead, “Oh, gosh, that was good. Do it again—only in slow motion this time. And if you could do it with hand gestures, I’d appreciate it even more.”

Chill out. Take things in stride. Know what and who you’re dealing with.

If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, I’ve got news for you. It is a duck.

Not a raccoon.

Even though your teenager may act more like a raccoon at the moment.

Slow Leak or Blowout?

I've had slow leaks in my car tires here and there over the years. Most of the time I wasn't even aware I had one until a mechanic pointed it out to me. Or until my wife said, "Hey, Leemie, your car looks like it's slumped over to one side. Are you sure your tires are okay on the right?" Okay, so she's the mechanical one in the family.

Slow leaks are sneaky. They're so subtle that because you don't notice them, they can blindside you. You go into the 7-Eleven to grab milk for dinner and come out to a tire that's hissing like a mad cat, then goes totally flat. Or what looks like a small bump in the road can cause the slow leak to become a hole, and you're left in the boonies on a country road.

Blowouts are no fun, but at least they're over with quickly. Your tire makes a loud *pop*, and even if you're not a brain scientist, you know to pull over to the shoulder. Then, if you're like me, you do the smart thing—you call roadside assistance and bask in the sun until they arrive.

When it comes to parenting powerful children, most parents choose the slow-leak method. They handle each situation with trepidation as it comes along, trying to keep the tire in good enough condition to keep trucking along.

But the slow-leak theory is doomed for failure. Most parents choose it because of a lack of confidence; they're not sure what they should do, and they're afraid to make a mistake.

The mistake would be not to act. You don't take on a powerful child in bits and pieces. You need to have a full box of tools at your disposal. That's what *Parenting Your Powerful Child* is about. It's the toolbox you'll need to fix and then redirect this powerful child you love so dearly.

Forced blowouts with your powerful child will not be pretty. But if you are decisive and you plan for them, you will make great headway with that child. That's because you, smart parent, are thinking through the strategies you're going to use ahead of time and how you're going to draw the parameters of the new behavior in your home.

**The mistake would
be not to act.**

Some kids are so powerful that even when you're doing the right thing, they'll give you a run for your money. They don't like the idea you're on the right track. It's what I call "the fish out of water syndrome." When you hook a fish, he does something unnatural. He leaves the water—his comfort zone—and leaps right into the air, trying to shake that hook. Your kid will do the same thing, so expect the fight. But don't give up on your strategy, and don't fight back. Fighting is an act of cooperation, so don't cooperate with your child in that way. She's adept at needlessly drawing you into her hassles and battles.

Other kids will throw this line your way: "Go ahead and take away my car privileges. I don't care." That's an indication of how powerful those kids are. The reality is, they do care. They care deeply. The idea of having no car privileges freaks them out because it will change their entire lifestyle. However, they don't want you to know you're on the right track, so they pretend indifference.

So, long and short, if your kid starts to fuss or tosses you the "it doesn't matter" line, you can smile. You're already starting to win the game.

But you can't win the game if you don't play.

Let's be honest. Some kids are easy kids. They do what they're told. They obey. They're predictable. You can count on them. You don't even have the dreaded toddler tantrums or the ripples that

many parents face with their teenagers. Life with those children is a stroll on Easy Street, so to speak.

Then there's your powerful child.

I ought to know. I was one of them, even though no psychologist back then would have thought to call me that. But my mother, God rest her soul, was a saint. She of all people would have had the right to give up on her juvenile-acting son, but she didn't. I'm thankful she lived long enough to see me make something of myself, because she, one of my high school teachers, and my wife-to-be all believed that I could take

You can't win the game if you don't play.

my innate power skills and use them to entertain and help people form rock-solid families. Am I still juvenile-acting? I admit that my buddy Moonhead and I have been known to wrestle each other—to our wives' dismay—as we wait for a table at our local restaurant.

Hardly anyone—other than those three ladies—expected me to make anything of myself. Yet here I am today.

You, parent, are your child's best champion. Powerful kids don't just happen; they're created . . . by you.

The good news is, what you've done, you can undo with determination, persistence, and willpower.

Powerful Ideas That Work

My youngest daughter has given me a run for my money since the day she was born. She was the toddler who stared me in the eye and pushed Cheerios off her plate and onto the floor. I swear, she just wanted a reaction. When she was 5, I told her to stay in the yard and not go out onto the street. Two minutes later, I heard cars honking, and there she was—in the middle of the street, standing there!

Now she's 11, and I can't count how many times my heart has stopped with this kid. Three months ago, when I was at my wits' end with her, I heard you speak on a radio program, and it gave me an idea. The next time she pulled an attention-getting stunt, I was ready. The timing was perfect. My husband had planned to take the three girls on a father-daughter campout weekend, and they were leaving early the next morning. Julie was really mad she didn't get to go. She slammed a couple doors, but I didn't react. She turned on the tears and yelled, "You're so unfair!" She spent the whole next day in her room, refusing to eat. She thought she was punishing me, but I had a nice, quiet day I really needed, and I slept soundly because I knew we'd done the right thing.

The next day she tried a few more power plays, but I remained calm. I turned my back and settled in on our sunporch to read. By the third day, she said to me meekly, "Uh, Mom, could you and I do lunch? I'll help." I was stunned. She even helped with the dishes. And when her sisters came home that evening, she was nice to them and asked about their trip. She hugged my husband. Then she turned to me and said, "Mom, thanks for having lunch with me." Because I stuck to my guns and used your advice, I have an adolescent that I now not only love but also like.

Jessica, Ohio

Power Points

- Powerful kids don't just happen; they're created.
- Give in and you won't win.
- Force a blowout, then remain calm.