Engaging parents in struggles over control is a normal part of every child’s development. While toddlers are famous for their full-scale tantrums, the arguments and oppositional behavior of school-age kids and teenagers are no less dramatic and for many parents may be even harder to deal with. Testing limits is a central part of our kids’ attempts to become independent. When kids are struggling to prove how independent they really are, parents often have good reason to feel that their authority is being challenged. For many children, the need to push away from parents is greatest when they are feeling least certain about their abilities to look after themselves. The strength of their protests may be loudest when their need for parents’ help and authority is greatest.

When children have experienced a traumatic event they often feel overwhelmed by fear and by the fact that they have lost control of their world. It is not surprising that at times when the feelings of fear and helplessness are strongest, children’s efforts to regain power and control may be especially powerful. Traumatized kids may begin to oppose and struggle with parents, teachers and friends, or the intensity of both tantrums and oppositional behavior may increase.

When kids rely too heavily on opposing and fighting, their efforts to re-establish a real sense of safety and control fail. If they succeed in drawing adults into struggles, children risk losing the very support that they need. As caregivers, our job is to help kids put the brakes on these unproductive battles and find more effective ways of dealing with the frightened, helpless feelings that have been stirred up by traumatic events.

**Handling Tantrums and Oppositional Behavior**

**Let Your Child Know When He/She Is Starting to Fight**
When your child begins to argue let him/her know that “what he/she is doing is making you mad and going to lead to a fight.” Tell him/her that “I’m not having this fight, because it doesn’t help you. It makes both of us mad and doesn’t help you feel better.”

**If Your Child Continues to Try to Engage You in the Fight**
Offer three choices that are options to the fight – for example “You can either do what I asked, you can talk about what is upsetting you, or you can go to your room and get yourself calmed down so that we can talk. What you can’t do is take this out on me.” The middle of a fight or tantrum (involving a child of any age) is not the time to have a discussion that requires reflection. The fight has to stop first.
IF YOUR CHILD ACKNOWLEDGES A CONNECTION
If your child recognizes a connection between the fighting and feelings regarding the traumatic event, interrupt the next struggle before it begins. Announce: “This is what we’ve talked about. It is happening again…”

IF THE STRUGGLES CONTINUE
If your child has not been able to talk about what has been going on, make a note of each fight for discussion in the next meeting with the clinician. The clinician can help you with a behavior management program using rewards and consequences.

WHEN DEALING WITH SCHOOL-AGE AND OLDER KIDS USE A CALM MOMENT TO INTRODUCE THE FOLLOWING:

CHANGES IN BEHAVIOR
Let your child know that since the event, he/she has been getting into a lot of fights about things that usually aren’t a big deal. Ask your child “can you tell me how you’ve been feeling since_____ (event)?”

FIGHTING DOESN’T HELP
Help your child understand that fighting with you isn’t helping him/her feel better, but instead makes you both mad and when he/she can’t stop him/herself and you have to punish him/her, it doesn’t feel good.

LET YOUR CHILD KNOW WHO’S BOSS
Explain to your child that “even when you are struggling with your feelings about the event, my job is to help you stop [the behavior] that is unacceptable whether or not you can or want to talk about your feelings.”

MAKE CONSEQUENCES
Tell your child know that if [X behavior] continues there will be very specific consequences and restrictions. Options can be discussed as part of the family meetings with the clinician.

REMEMBER PARENTS:

BE AWARE OF HOW YOU ARE FEELING
If you are upset, angry or distressed, give yourself the time to get calmer before attempting to help your child feel calmer.

REMIND CHILD OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THEIR BEHAVIOR AND FEELINGS
Which are brought up by the event, as discussed in meetings with clinician.

MAINTAIN ROUTINES
Keep routines that existed before the traumatic events as a way of supporting order and predictability in your child’s world.