

The Strong-Willed Child - *by James Dobson, Ph.D.*

One has to wonder why so many "experts" on parenting have failed to notice that some children are tougher to raise than others. One would never get that impression from reading the advice offered by this army of permissive psychologists, counselors, pediatricians, psychiatrists, and columnists for women's magazines, who are convinced that raising kids is as simple as falling off a log. All parents need to do, they have been saying for decades, is give them a lot of space, treat them like adults, and if absolutely necessary, explain every now and then why they might want to consider behaving better.

How nice it would be if that were true. Unfortunately, this rosy view is cruel nonsense. It leaves Mom and Dad with the impression that every other parent in the world finds it easy to lead children, and those who are having trouble with it are miserable failures. In most cases, it is not fair and it is not true.

Healthy parenting can be boiled down to those two essential ingredients: love and control. They must operate in a system of checks and balances. Any concentration on love to the exclusion of control usually breeds disrespect and contempt. Conversely, an authoritarian and oppressive home atmosphere is deeply resented by the child who feels unloved or even hated. The objective for the toddler years is to strike a balance between mercy and justice, affection and authority, love and control.

How Parents Can Lead a Strong-Willed Child

1. You should not blame yourself for the temperament with which your child was born. She is simply a tough kid to handle, and your task is to match her stride for stride.
2. Your strong-willed child is in greater danger because of his inclination to test the limits and scale the walls. Your utmost diligence and wisdom will be required to deal with him. You simply have to be tougher than he is, but do it without being angry and oppressive.
3. If you fail to understand his lust for power and independence, you can exhaust your resources and bog down in guilt. It will benefit no one.
4. For parents who have just begun, take charge of your baby now, hold tightly to the reins of authority, and quickly begin building into her an attitude of respect and obedience. You will need every ounce of awe you can muster in coming years. Once you have established your right to lead, begin to let go of the reins systematically, year by year.
5. Don't panic, even during the storms of adolescence. They never last forever. The sun will shine again, producing, perhaps, a beautiful rainbow over your spirit. You're going to get through this.
6. Don't let your child stray too far from you emotionally. Stay in touch. Don't write him off, even when your every impulse is to do just that. He needs you now more than ever before.
7. Give that kid time to find herself, even if she appears not to be searching.
8. Most importantly, I urge you to hold your children before the Lord in fervent prayer day by day by day. Begin every morning with a prayer for wisdom and guidance.

Wills are Born, Not Made

Willfulness is built into the nature of some kids. It is simply part of their emotional and intellectual package brought with them into the world. This aspect of inborn temperament is not something boys and girls *learn*. It is something they are.

The "blank slate" hypothesis is a myth. Children don't start life at the same place. They bring with them an individuality that is uniquely their own, different from that of every other individual who has ever lived. One of their innate characteristics is what I have termed "the strength of the will," which varies from child to child.

What do we know specifically about children with particularly strong wills?

1. There are nearly three times as many strong-willed kids as those who are compliant.
2. Birth order has nothing to do with being strong-willed or compliant.
3. Most parents know they have a strong-willed child very early.
4. The temperaments of children tend to reflect those of their parents.
5. Parents of strong-willed children can expect a battle during the teen years, even if they have raised them properly.

The best news for parents of strong-willed children is the rapid decrease in their rebellion in young adulthood. It drops almost immediately in the early twenties and then trails off even more from there. Some are still angry into their twenties and early thirties, but by then the fire is gone for the majority. They peacefully rejoin the human community.