

## Helping You Navigate Your Journey Through Parenting

# Parenting Your Strong-Willed Child



BY KIM DeMARCHI

Do you have a strong-willed child? If you do, you'll know! What does your strong-willed child look like? What characteristics do they have? Stubborn, persistent, never backs down, demanding, bossy, relentless, challenging, wants to be in charge, locks in, difficult, and high energy? Do any of these traits sound familiar?

Fortunately, there is an upside to being strong-willed! What are some of the positive characteristics of being strong-willed? Self-motivated, KNOW what they want and go after it, inner-directed, strong moral compass, less influenced by peer pressure, leadership qualities, integrity, big passionate feelings, and lives life fully.

### *No one likes being told what to do, but strong-willed kids find it unbearable.*

Strong-willed kids aren't just being difficult. They feel their integrity is compromised if they're forced to submit to another person's will. If they're allowed to choose, they love to cooperate.

Of course you want your child to do what you say, not because he's obedient, but because he trusts YOU. He's learned that even though you can't always say yes to what he wants, you have his best interests at heart. You want to raise a child that has self-discipline, takes responsibility, and is considerate – and most important, has the discernment to figure out who to trust and when to be influenced by someone else. Breaking a child's will leaves him open to the influence of others who often will not serve his highest interests. It can also damage the trusting relationship between parent and child.

So, how do parents protect those fabulous qualities of their strong-willed child AND at the same time, encourage their cooperation? "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of

cure." Having said that, there are some general parenting principles to keep in mind on a daily basis with your strong-willed child.

- **Instill routines and limits** Invite cooperation by creating routines together; they'll have more buy-in. Let the routine do the talking. It takes the parent out of the equation. You must pick your battles. Perhaps, "In our family, phones stay away from the meal table." OR "In our home, we do homework before screen time."

- **Know that they are experiential learners** It is far more effective to let them learn through experience, instead of trying to control them. They want to learn things for themselves, rather than accepting what others tell them. So, that means they will test limits over and over and over. They can't do something just because their parent said so; that would compromise their integrity. They have to choose to cooperate.

- **Honor their desire for mastery**

Let them take charge of as many of their own activities as possible. Let them dress themselves. Let them fold their own clothes. Let them roast their own marshmallow. Many strong-willed kids become quite competent through their persistence on figuring something out. Allow him to do as much as he is willing or able to do. Kids who feel independent and in charge themselves, will have less need to be oppositional.

- **Offer lots of choices** Give appropriate choices that you can live with and you find acceptable. It's kind to the strong-willed child. "Do you want to leave now or in ten minutes? Okay,

ten minutes with no fuss? Let's shake on it. Since it could be hard to stop playing in ten minutes, how can I help you? Would you like a verbal reminder or a reminder with an egg timer?"

- **Give authority over own body** "I hear that you don't want to wear your jacket today. I think it's cold and I am definitely wearing a jacket. Of course, you are in charge of your own body, as long as you stay safe and healthy, so you get to decide whether to wear a jacket. But I'm afraid that you will be cold once we are outside, and I won't want to come back to the house. Would you like to put your jacket in the backpack, and then we'll have it if you change your mind. Or do you want to skip it?" It's just hard for her to imagine feeling cold when she's so warm right now in the house, and a jacket seems like such a hassle. She's sure she's right – her own body is telling her so – so naturally she resists you. You don't want to undermine that self-confidence; just teach her that there's no shame in letting new information change her mind.

- **Don't push into opposition** Force always creates "push-back" – with humans of all ages. If you take a hard and fast position, you can easily push your child into defying you, just to prove a point. You'll know when it's a power struggle and you're invested in winning. Just stop, take a breath, and remind yourself that winning a battle with your child always sets you up to lose what's most important: the relationship.



- **Listen** Listen for the need that underlies the behavior. There is a viewpoint that is making your child hold fast to her position, and she is trying to protect something that seems important to her. Only by listening calmly to her and reflecting her words will you come to understand what's making her oppose you. A non-judgmental: "I hear that you don't want to take a bath. Can you tell me more about why?" might just elicit the information that she's afraid she'll go down the drain, like Alice in the song. It may not seem like a good reason to you, but she has a reason. And you won't find it out if you get into a clash and order her into the tub.

- **Offer respect and empathy** Most strong-willed children are fighting for respect. If you offer it to them, they don't need to fight to protect their position. And, like the rest of us, it helps a lot if they feel understood. If you see his point of view and think he's wrong – for instance, he wants to wear the Superman cape to church and you think that's inappropriate – you can still offer him empathy and meet him part way while you set the limit. "You love this cape and wish you could wear it, don't you? But when we go to services, we dress up in our nice clothes to show respect. I know you'll miss wearing the cape. Would you like to take it with us so you can wear it on our way home, or do you want to wait until we get home?"

Strong-willed children are special. Try not to take their non-compliance as a personal insult. They are very much their own unique person with their own agenda. Focus on gaining their cooperation by using the strategies above, not demanding their obedience. As long as parents can resist the impulse to "break their will", strong-willed children often become terrific teens and adults.

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