



Parenting your

STRONG-WILLED CHILD

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What exactly is a strong-willed child? Sometimes we call them "difficult", "stubborn," or "defiant" but we could also call them "determined", "spirited", or "courageous". Strong-willed kids want to learn things for themselves rather than accepting what others say, so they test the limits over and over. They want to be "in charge" of themselves, and will sometimes put their desire to "be right" above everything else. When their heart is set on something, their brains seem to have a hard time switching gears. Strong-willed kids have big, passionate feelings and live at full throttle. Unfortunately, strong-willed kids are prone to power-struggles with their parents and some can be aggressive. They can be challenging children to parent, especially when younger.

Here are some ideas to parent your strong-willed child:

BE SELECTIVE: One of the biggest challenges when raising strong-willed kids is that they don't listen and parents give up. You want to be very selective about the things you are going to discipline for or else you will end up in constant power struggles with your child. You should only discipline for **willful acts of defiance** as opposed to regular age-appropriate behaviour. Sometimes it can be tricky to tell the difference. A willful act of defiance occurs when three criteria have been met: (1) you have clearly set out a rule for your child; (2) the child knows the rule and is capable of following it; and (3) the child breaks the rule.

Classic examples of a willful act of defiance are physical aggression, swearing, lying, stealing, breaking curfew etc. Being silly at the dinner table, not coming when called, making a mess in the house, or teasing a sibling are not willful acts of defiance as they are often age appropriate behaviours. Yes, these behaviours may annoy you, and your kids may get under your skin, but they are not something you need to discipline.

Review your child's behaviour over the past few weeks. Choose the **two worst behaviours** that your child is displaying, these are the behaviours you will be disciplining for over the next few weeks. Even if the child is defying you in other ways, you are only going to discipline the two behaviours you have chosen. You have to preserve your energy and sometimes it can feel as if you are just running around yelling at your child and giving consequences. Once you pick out those two behaviours, you are going to say to your child "I have noticed that you are hitting your brother a lot. The next time you hit your brother, you are going to get a consequence." Be specific about the consequence and make sure it is uncomfortable but tolerable. Better yet, if your child responds well to incentives, instead of giving a consequence, you can use an incentive system where your child works towards earning rewards for not engaging in willful acts of defiance.

BE VICTORIOUS. When you draw a line in the sand with your strong-willed child and you have laid down the law, you have to enforce this rule 100% of the time. What is going to happen though, the minute you set down a rule with your strong willed child, she/he is probably going to break the rule in the next 24 hours. A strong willed child always wants to be on top; they want to see if they can make you give in. Children who are less determined will give up the battle much easier. But not a strong-willed child. They will push you as hard as they can to be victorious. Sometimes I think that being a strong disciplinarian to a strong-willed child is like standing there like a brick wall. Kids that are strong willed, run into things because they test the boundaries. Unfortunately, you are the one that your child is going to have to run into. Make sure that when they run into you, you don't topple over, the child topples over.

BE CONSISTENT. The key to being consistent is not letting yourself get too fatigued. Many parents get “battle fatigue”. They are so sick of having the same fights over and over. Strong-willed children are very resilient and they are younger and have more stamina than you. They know that they can wear you down. So, if you make sure that your battle plan is the same this week and next week and next month, you will eventually get to the point when your child won’t even challenge you on certain things because you have won over and over. The beginning of dealing with a strong-willed child is the hardest. Eventually, a child will come to the point when they just don’t wage war in certain areas that they know they are going to lose.

BE EMPATHETIC. Empathizing with a child’s emotions builds strong connections. The more connected your child feels to you, the greater the influence you will have on their behaviour. All feelings are valid, including anger. So don’t dismiss or discount how your strong-willed child feels. Validate your child’s feelings, but set limits on their behaviour; “It’s okay to feel angry but you cannot take the iPad from your brother when he is using it.”

BE POSITIVE. Even strong-willed children have wonderful strengths. So don’t squash their energy, instead channel it in constructive ways. If you focus on their excessive behaviour it’s easy to become impatient, and have parental anxiety. Remember, every weakness has a corresponding strength. Qualities such as stubborn, strong, and difficult can also be seen in a positive light in a different situation; they can be viewed as assertive, independent, energetic, persistent, and exuberant.

BE QUIET. I know you’ve heard this before, but try not to yell at your kids. If your only disciplinary tool is to raise your voice, you have lost the battle. By no means am I suggesting that you speak in your fun-loving kid-friendly voice. Use a stern voice and make eye contact. Let your child know you are serious, but keep your voice down. You will have much more influence over your children if you refrain from yelling and yelling always backfires with strong-willed kids.

DON’T FORGET... I want to encourage you if you have a strong-willed child. These are the kids who are going somewhere in life. If you are going to be successful as an adult, you have to have tenacity and an element of strong will. Strong will takes you somewhere. So when you look at a child who is driving you crazy, remind yourself: Your job is not to take the will out of the child. Your job is not to overhaul her personality. Your job is to bend them in a direction where that stubbornness and strong will works for them and not against them (and you). And eventually they learn to control themselves by having control imposed on them by you. Finally, if you are a strong-willed person yourself, remember, this child is probably going to be the toughest to raise because he will remind you of yourself.

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SOURCES: Raising Your Spirited Child, Third Edition: A Guide for Parents Whose Child Is More Intense, Sensitive, Perceptive, Persistent, and Energetic by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (2015); Parenting Great Kids (podcast); Dr. Meg Meeker (July 18, 2016).