

THE NEW
STRONG-
WILLED
CHILD
Workbook

DR. JAMES DOBSON



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THE WILD & WOOLLY WILL

Taken from chapter 1, "The Wild & Woolly Will,"
and chapter 2, "Mothers Share Their Stories"

GETTING IT STARTED

Who's in charge here?

Children want to know how tough their leaders are. They respect those who show power and courage. Thus, whether you are a parent, a grandparent, a Scout leader, a bus driver, or a schoolteacher, sooner or later one of the children under your authority will clench his little fist and take you on. You had better be prepared to prove him wrong in that moment or the challenge will happen again and again.

Dr. Dobson calls this defiant game "Challenge the Chief," and it can be played with surprising skill by very young children. He tells the story of a father who took his three-year-old daughter to a basketball game. The child was, of course, interested in everything in the gym except the athletic contest. Dad permitted her to roam free and climb on the bleachers, but he set definite limits regarding how far she could stray. He took her by the hand and walked with her to a stripe painted on the gym floor.

"You can play all around the building, Janie, but don't go past this line," he instructed her. He had no sooner returned to his seat than the toddler scurried in the direction of the forbidden territory. She stopped at the border for a moment, then flashed a grin over her shoulder

to her father, and deliberately placed one foot over the line as if to say, “Whatcha gonna do about it?” Virtually every parent the world over has been asked the same question at one time or another.

The entire human race is afflicted with the same tendency toward willful defiance that this three-year-old exhibited. Her behavior in the gym is not so different from the folly of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God had told them they could eat anything in the Garden except the forbidden fruit (in effect, “Do not go past this line”). Yet they challenged the authority of the Almighty by deliberately disobeying His commandment.

Perhaps this tendency toward self-will is the essence of original sin that has infiltrated the human family. This is why proper, immediate response to willful defiance during childhood is required, for that rebellion can plant the seeds of future personal disaster. The weed that grows from it may become a tangled briar patch during the troubled days of adolescence.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. Describe a time when you (the parent or teacher) won the “Challenge the Chief” game. Then recall a time when your child was the victor. What made the difference?

2. Why do you think children need borders and boundaries?

3. How can a strong will be a negative trait? a positive one?

4. How do kids treat leaders they don't respect?

5. When you were a child, how would your parents have described you?

LAYING IT OUT

NO TURNING BACK; NO BACKING DOWN

Really, you don't understand.

Unless you've had a strong-willed child of your own, you can't comprehend the unique challenges such parents face.

When a parent doesn't stand up to his or her child's defiant challenge, though, something changes in the relationship. The youngster begins to look at his mother and father with disrespect; they are unworthy of his allegiance. More important, she wonders why they would let her do something so harmful if they really loved her. The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents but insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them.

LEARNING FROM BAD EXAMPLES

Dr. Dobson tells the story of a certain little spitfire. At thirty-six months, he had already bewildered and overwhelmed his mother. The contest of wills was over. He had won it. His sassy talk—to his mother and anyone else who got in his way—was legendary in the neighborhood. Then one day he rode his tricycle down the driveway and into the street, which panicked his mother. The woman rushed out of the house and caught up with her son as he pedaled down the street. She took hold of his handlebars to redirect him, and he came unglued.

“Get your dirty hands off my tricycle!” he screamed. His eyes were squinted in fury. The woman did as she was told. The life of her child was in danger, yet this mother did not have the courage to make him obey her. He continued to ride down the street while she trailed along behind, hoping for the best.

How could a tiny little boy at three years of age buffalo his thirty-year-old mother in this way? Clearly, she had no idea how to manage him. He was simply tougher than she—and they both knew it. This mild-mannered woman had produced an iron-willed youngster who was willing to fight with anyone who tried to rein him in, and you can be sure that his mom's physical and emotional resources were continually drained by his antics.

SOME KIDS HAVE CROOKED WHEELS

In thinking about the characteristics of compliant and defiant children, Dr. Dobson sought an illustration to explain the vastly differing thrusts of human temperaments. He found an appropriate analogy in a supermarket. Here's how he describes it:

Imagine yourself in a grocery store, pushing a cart up the aisle. You give the basket a small shove, and it glides at least nine feet out in front and then comes to a gradual stop. You walk along happily tossing in the soup and ketchup and loaves of bread. Grocery shopping is such an easy task, for even when the cart is burdened with goods, it can be directed with one finger.

But buying groceries is not always so blissful. On other occasions, you select a cart that ominously awaits your arrival at the front of the market. When you push the stupid thing forward, it tears off to the left and knocks over a stack of bottles. Refusing to be outmuscled by an empty cart, you throw all your weight behind the handle, fighting desperately to keep the ship on course. It seems to have a mind of its own. You are trying to do the same shopping assignment that you accomplished with ease the week before, but the job feels more like combat duty today. You are exhausted by the time you herd the contumacious cart toward the checkout counter.

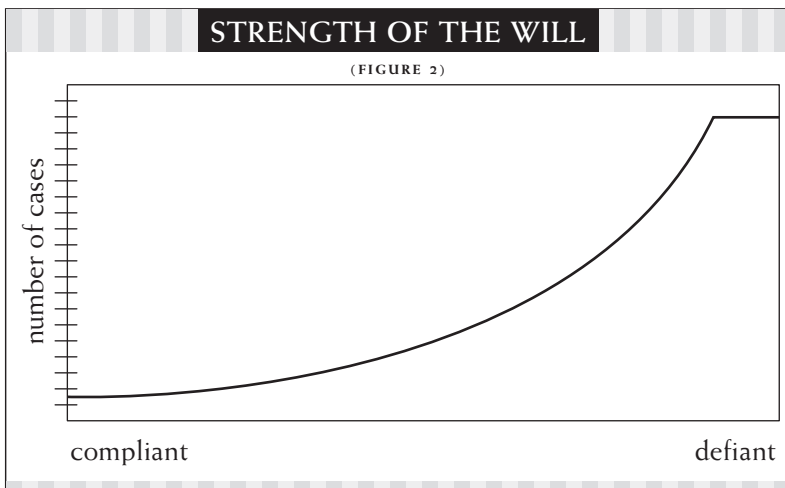
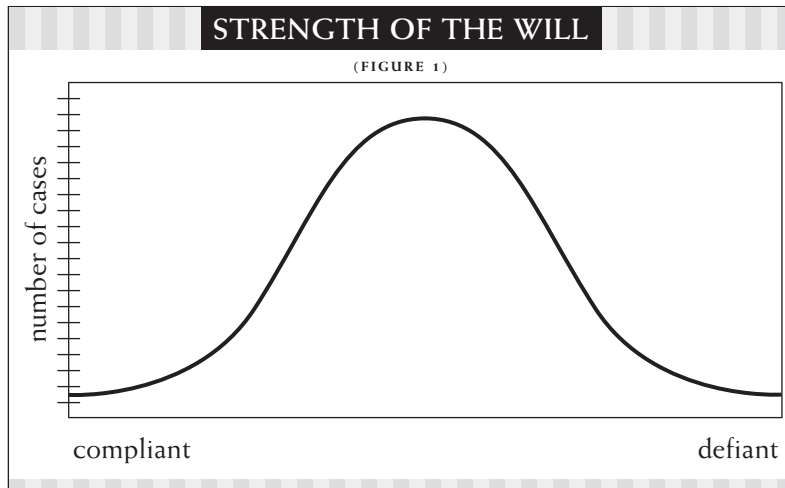
What is the difference between the two shopping baskets? Obviously, one has straight, well-oiled wheels that go where they are guided. The other has crooked, bent wheels that refuse to yield.

Do you get the point? We might as well face it: some kids have crooked wheels! They do not want to go where they are led, because their own inclinations take them in other directions. Furthermore, the parent who is pushing the cart must expend seven times the energy to make it move, compared with the parent of a child with straight wheels. Of course, only mothers and fathers of strong-willed children will fully comprehend the meaning of this example.

THE CLASSIC STRONG-WILLED CHILD

How is the strength of the will distributed among children? Dr. Dobson originally assumed that this aspect of human temperament was represented by a typical bell-shaped curve. He presumed that a relatively small number of very compliant kids appeared at one end of the continuum and an equally small number of defiant youngsters were represented at the other. The rest, comprising the majority, were likely to fall somewhere near the middle of the distribution. However, having talked to at least 100,000 harried parents, Dr. Dobson is now convinced that his supposition was wrong.

Dr. Dobson, however, warns not to take this observation too literally. Maybe it only *seems* that the majority of toddlers are confirmed anarchists. Furthermore, there is a related phenomenon regarding sibling relationships. In a family with two children, one is likely to be compliant and the other defiant. Who knows why it works out that way? There they are, born to the same parents, but as different as though they came from different planets. One cuddles to your embrace, and the



other kicks you in the navel. One is a natural sweetheart, and the other goes through life like hot lava. One follows orders, and the other gives them. Quite obviously, they are marching to a different set of drums.

DEFINING THE COMPLIANT CHILD

The compliant child is not necessarily wimpy or spineless. That fact is important to our understanding of his nature and how he differs from his strong-willed sibling. The distinction between the two is not a matter of confidence, willingness to take risks, sparkling personalities, or other desirable characteristics. Rather, the

issue under consideration here is focused on the strength of the will—on the inclination of some children to resist authority and determine their own course, as compared with those who are willing to be led. Dr. Dobson believes that these temperaments are prepackaged before birth and do not have to be cultivated or encouraged. They will make themselves known soon enough.

Your child may not fit either pattern. Another category of temperaments in children includes those who are not really strong-willed—at least, their assertiveness is not expressed in the same way. The distinction here is not one of independence and aggressiveness. It is a matter of tactics. They rarely challenge the authority of their parents or teachers in a stiff-necked manner, but they are willful nonetheless. Dr. Dobson calls them “sneaky.”

Adults think these youngsters are going along with the program, but inside, subversion is afoot. When no one is looking, these children break the rules and push the limits. When caught, as inevitably they are, they may lie or rationalize or seek to hide the evidence. The appropriate approach to these sneaky kids is not appreciably different from handling the strong-willed child. Sooner or later, his or her self-will can be expected to break into the open, usually during early adolescence. Then, it’s “Katie, bar the door.”

THINKING IT THROUGH

1. In what ways is parenting what you expected? How does it differ from what you expected, especially regarding your children’s temperaments?

2. When have you felt guilt, self-condemnation, or self-doubt in your parenting?

3. When have you felt that others were judging you for having a strong-willed child, especially other parents who have compliant children?

4. Do you believe everything will work out for the best for your strong-willed child? Why or why not?

5. Why do many parents fear being firm with their children?

6. How do you respond to parents whose children are obviously out of control? How do you respond to “helpful comments” from your friends or family members?

7. If it is true that a child is strong-willed from birth, what are the signs? What might be the signs for a compliant child?

CASE STUDY: Portrait of an Angel

Consider the following case study of a strong-willed child from Dr. Dobson’s files:

Dana slept through the night at maybe fifteen months old. At eighteen months old, you could tell her no and she would fall on the floor, throw a fit, and roll around. We would sit and watch her for a while because we weren’t going to give in. We were going to be strong. She would stand up, and she would have that beautiful angelic face, and she would say, “I’m sorry.”

She would come over and lay her head in my lap, and then she would bite me. That was the first clue because it was a manipulation. She made sure that you weren't worried about what she was going to do, and then she would bite. She was very, very tough.

Later, there was an episode where she had been out throwing rocks at cars. I called her in and I said, "Dana, why were you throwing rocks at cars?" She said, "Well, I did warn them. I told them they didn't belong on my street. As they went down the road I told them if they came back by, that I'd have to throw a rock at their car. So I threw rocks at them." I took her in to spank her and she said, "You're not going to spank me. I'm going to wait until my daddy gets home."

She knew the longer she could put off a spanking, the longer she had to work up her defense. I said, "No, I'm going to spank you now." She said, "No, you're not. You will not spank me." I said, "Yes, I will." That day, I think, was a terrifying day because I physically could not control her. She threw every ounce of strength and determination into fighting me. It was a battle that probably lasted an hour and a half—and this child was five years old. It ended with my putting her out in the garage. She was walking around screaming.

Then she rang the doorbell, and she said, "I'll take my spanking now." I did spank her, because I knew if I ever let her win one of those battles, I would never have control of her again. But it was a constant struggle.

When Dana was in her first year in college, she wrote this note in midyear:

Dear Mom,

Hey there. This is going to be a weird letter. I've been doing a lot of lifelong thinking. Mom, sometimes I wonder where I would be and what life would be like if I hadn't come back from the dark side. You know, I never thought that I would consider my mother to be my best friend, but you are. I would never trade this closeness I've gained with you for anything in the world.

You and Dad used to say that if I would just wait until it was time for me to move out, that you would be behind me 100 percent. Now I understand. I know that you and I were growing, even when I was at home, but I don't think that I ever truly appreciated you until now. At least, not as much as you deserve to be

appreciated. I miss you every day. I mean, I thought that when I went to school I would never want to go home or even call. But I don't like to go through the day without talking to you.

You know, I hope that one day I will be as successful as Daddy. I want to be as keen and respected in my field as he is in his. But you, above all, had the hardest profession of all. You had to raise me. Mom, I hope that you understand what a gift God gave you. He gave you the will and the power to raise me. You showed me the kinds of things that no college or professional school could ever teach me. I can only pray that one day God will make me the kind of mother you have been and will always be to me. I just wanted to take a minute to say, "Thank you" and "I love you."

Your baby girl,
Dana

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Do you think Dana's parents should have responded to her differently? What would you have done in their situation?

2. How have you and your spouse resolved the issue of spanking?

3. We know that not every story has a happy ending. How would you deal with a strong-willed adult?

4. What would it mean to you to one day receive a letter like Joy did from her daughter Dana?

DIGGING DEEPER

JACOB AND HIS CHILDREN

Read Genesis 37:1-11 focusing on verses 3, 4, and 11.

¹Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

²This is the account of Jacob. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because

he had been born to him in his old age; and he made a richly ornamented robe for him. ⁴When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him. ⁵Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had: ⁷We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it.” ⁸His brothers said to him, “Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?” And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said. ⁹Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. “Listen,” he said, “I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” ¹⁰When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” ¹¹His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Clearly, Jacob loved Joseph best. This story explores part of the damage done by favoring one child over another.

1. If someone outside your family observed you, would he or she say that you have a favorite among your children?

2. If you conclude that you have both a strong-willed child and a compliant child, how will you ensure that you don't favor the one who seems to consistently behave better?

3. How can you show each child that he or she is precious and loved?

TAKING IT HOME

Dr. Dobson offers two helpful observations for parents who are raising strong-willed children. First, he says, it is common for these moms and dads to feel great guilt and self-condemnation. They are trying so hard to be good parents, but the struggle for control at home, day after day, leaves them frustrated and fatigued. No one told them that parenthood would be this difficult, and they blame themselves for the tension that arises.

They had planned to be such loving and effective parents, reading fairy tales by the fireplace to their pajama-clad angels, who would then toddle happily off to bed. The difference between life as it is and life as it ought to be is distressing.

Second, Dr. Dobson writes, it is important to realize that parents of strong-willed children face unique challenges. All too often, parents of compliant children don't understand their friends with defiant youngsters. They intensify guilt and embarrassment by implying, *If you would raise your kids the way I do mine, you wouldn't be having those awful problems.* Willful children can be difficult to manage even when parents handle their responsibilities with great skill and dedication.

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Come up with a list of examples of strong-willed adults, either family members or famous individuals. What traits do they have in common? Which of those characteristics do you see in your children?

2. When have you experienced guilt about your child's seemingly wild behavior in a store or restaurant? How could you better convey the need for boundaries outside the home? What do others expect of you and your strong-willed child?

3. Create profiles for your children. Do any of them fit the classic strong-willed child profile? Do any of them fit the compliant child profile? Are any of them what Dr. Dobson would call “sneaky”?

JOURNALING

1. Talk about your fears with God in prayer. Share your longings and desires for your strong-willed child. Write out a prayer that God will use _____’s strength for His glory.

2. Describe areas in your child’s (or children’s) life that are especially in need of prayer.

3. What would you say (if you could say anything) to the parents of “model” children to help them understand the unique trials of raising a strong-willed child?

4. Record some of your recent failures and victories as a parent.

5. Write out your dreams for your child, taking into account his or her strong-willed nature.
