

Our personalities are a mixture of our genetics and our environment. Each child is different and sometimes those differences will give you a child who is very strong-willed. That means that they want to do things their way *all the time*.

Good and Strong

Having a strong-willed child is a good thing. It may be tough now, but a forty-year-long study shows that strong-willed children are more likely to become higher income earners, entrepreneurs and leaders. They are more competitive, more likely to fight for what they believe in, and more determined to win. But a strong-willed child who isn't taught self-control and healthy limits may barrel through life with reckless abandon. This type of determination is cute in a one-year-old, but it's tough to cope with when it's out of control in a ten or twelve-year-old.

Your Parenting Style Matters

Parenting style is important because it can either help channel their energy into something positive, or it can crush it.

Authoritarian Style – this is the “because I said so” approach, where authority and obedience are expected and demanded. Disobedience is punished, and a child's feelings and reactions are considered less important than their compliance.

Permissive Indulgent Style – these parents put the feelings of their children first and are less likely to enforce expectations or boundaries because they feel like they limit their children. They tend to believe that children will naturally choose good behavior, and they prefer to be a friend over being an authority figure.

Authoritative Style – these parents set boundaries and expectations just like authoritarian parents do, but they also consider it equally important to respond to their children's reactions and feelings. Rules and expectations are presented in a positive rather than punitive way. They also balance negative consequences with positive parenting, meaning they encourage good behavior by praising it when they see it happen.

It may look like authoritarian parents have the best control because their children typically are too afraid to act up for fear of being punished, their kids learn only to be punishment dodgers. They aren't taught to manage emotions and disappointments. Permissive parents don't teach their children how to control their actions and emotions either because they give in to them. When both of these parenting styles come up against a strong-willed child, where control is often a tug-a-war, it becomes a huge power struggle that either turns into yelling and frustration, or defeat.

Authoritative parents, on the other hand, put emphasis on controlling situations, and they nurture the relationship with their child. Studies have shown that relationship is more important than rewards and punishments in getting a child to respect boundaries and expectations. By guiding your child through situations and struggles, lovingly helping them to meet your expectations and staying within your boundaries, you teach them self-control and respect in the long-run. This helps them channel that incredible energy and determination into positive things, such as respectful competition in school or sports, and standing up for themselves, others, or for something they believe in.

Remember, the importance is on controlling *situations* rather than controlling your child. The goal is to develop your child's ability to manage their behavior, disappointments, and emotions in a healthy way, and help you gain the cooperation you need from them.

Gaining Control of the Situation

Refusing to do what they are asked.

Parenting Strategy: First, make sure you have **routines** and expectations in place so that your child has a predictable schedule and household rules to follow. Next, if your child digs in, refuses, or gets upset, you can start by giving *comfort* and asking them what is causing the upset. Don't let this become an argument – hear their feelings, hug them, and then have them do what is expected of them. Finally, give them the request couched in a choice. It would sound something like this, “Connor, you can choose to get dressed now or go to daycare in your pajamas. Either way, we are leaving in ten minutes.”

Arguing with you.

Parenting Strategy: Don't get into a power struggle with your child. Instead, change the discussion into a *choice*. It might sound like this: “I love you way too much to argue with you. You need to choose if you want to continue arguing without me or if you still want to go to the park later.”

Making their own rules.

Parenting Strategy: First, allow the child to make their rules where it is OK to do so. You can limit their choices so that it will work with your family. Second, don't have too many rules that can overwhelm or unmotivate your child. Focus on the important ones, such as communication, bedtime, being on time, respecting others, getting homework done, and not harming themselves, others, or property. You know what rules are important to you. Then allow your child to live with natural consequences over minor issues. I call these self-taught lessons. If they refuse to wear a coat to school, then they will have to deal with being cold on the playground.

Doesn't want to eat the meal you made.

Parenting Strategy: Mealtime should be a pleasant time where the family is together. Provide lots of healthy choices, even the ones they've turned down, and include one or two things that you know they'll like. Then, make them a plate with some of each item and let them decide whether to eat and how much. Children need lots of opportunities to learn to like different foods. Like all things with kids, food preferences are another stage they go through. By not pressuring your child to eat certain things, you give them opportunity and time to learn to like them later.

The emphasis for each of these examples is on controlling the situation rather than your child and allowing them the freedom to choose either negative or positive consequences. By doing this, you remove some of the power struggles and help gain more cooperation from your child. Remember that there will be times when a battle of wills will break out, and you may simply have to walk away until both you and your child are calm enough for you to handle the situation appropriately. You don't have to deal with every flare-up right in the moment. Take some time to take care of your emotions so that you can better guide your child through theirs.

Resources include:

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