

Help for Raising Strong-Willed Children

By Kendra Smiley and Jim Burns

If you have been *blessed* with a strong-willed child, you know that parenting can be a difficult task. Unfortunately, there aren't any ready-made formulas that apply to all kids when it comes to parenting. As good parenting requires an individual approach to each child, it's even more important when trying to raise a strong-willed child. For an upcoming broadcast of *HomeWord with Jim Burns*, I recently interviewed Kendra Smiley, founder of "*Live Life Intentionally*," an organization that provides resources for positive life choices. Kendra knows about parenting strong-willed children since she and her husband reared one to successful adulthood. In fact, she was named the 2001 *Illinois Mother of the Year*. She has authored several books, including the recent *Aaron's Way: The Journey of a Strong-Willed Child*, which recounts the story of raising her strong-willed son. During our interview, Kendra provided some important insights and tips for parents who find themselves in the trenches of parenting strong-willed children, and I want to pass them along to you.

What is a Strong-Willed Child?

Kendra Smiley defines strong-willed children as those who know how they want the world to be run and have no tolerance for anyone who disagrees with their viewpoint. The strong-willed child is very persistent and is willing to take punishment in order to win on any given issue. Because they are gifted in manipulation, strong-willed children are not always overtly defiant. They can be quite subtle, and even charming, in their attempts to control. They are willing to and capable of causing emotional upset in order to gain the upper hand. Strong-willed children don't necessarily want to control everyone around them. They just don't want to be controlled by anyone else.

Discipline: Calm is Better!

Discipline is a key issue when it comes to molding a strong-willed child. Smiley advises setting clear expectations and consequences. When expectations are violated, be sure to be consistent in discipline. According to Smiley, parents who cancel punishments midstream are "short-sighted." Further, when disciplining strong-willed kids, control your emotions. Don't discipline in anger. Kendra says, "An out-of-control adult is not effective and is usually counterproductive. When we (as parents) go out of control, the strong-willed child wins the battle." In fact, Kendra's son, Aaron, a strong-willed child when growing up, claims that discipline worked best when it was unemotional. Anger in discipline was a sure sign to him that he needed to dig in his own heels.

Our goal is to raise our kids to become responsible adults. It's hard. Parents need to take time to focus, to remind themselves that they are, in fact, the parents. It's not your calling to be your child's "friend." It's your high calling and privilege to be your child's parent. With a strong-willed child, choosing battles wisely is important – but so is the corollary: Be sure to win battles you've chosen to fight.

Strong-Willed Children and Their Spiritual Lives

Strong-willed children often struggle with their spiritual lives because they tend to think outside the box. When it comes to faith issues, parents who resort to answering questions with “because I said so” will find that their strong-willed children don’t respond well. Rather, parental modeling of an authentic faith and diligently seeking to find honest answers to your strong-willed children’s spiritual questions are key. They want to know if you are the real deal when it comes to living the Christian life.

Co-Parenting a Strong-Willed Child

Smiley believes that moms and dads need to provide a unified front when it comes to parenting strong-willed kids. Some conflict and disagreement when it comes to parenting is normal between parents, but Smiley advises that moms and dads not disagree on parenting issues in front of the strong-willed child. The strong-willed child is very attentive to differences in how Mom and Dad handle parenting issues. As a result, parents who don’t “sing from the same sheet of music” can open themselves up to instances where their child will play one parent off the other in his or her efforts to gain control.

Tips for Parenting the Strong-Willed Child

- Don’t Quit! Become a student of your children. Get to know them. Make sure you communicate with them regularly and not just in “lecture mode.” Be sure that you are a good listener. Remember, God won’t give up on your child. Neither should you.
- Pray, pray, pray! Then, pray some more! Ask God to give you wisdom, patience and a spirit of peace as you raise your strong-willed child. God loves your child and He will give you the strength and insight you need to mold your child into a responsible and God-honoring young woman or young man.
- Look at your child the way Jesus looks at your child. Many strong-willed children do not fulfill their potential, because the adults who mold their lives have little patience and don’t understand them. Be sure you look beyond where your child is today . See the potential in your child. See in your child the disciple that Jesus wants him or her to become.

Parenting is messy, and, as it has been said, it would be much easier without children! Still, if you are proactive and consistent in your parenting (as opposed to reactive and inconsistent), your strong-willed child can grow up to be a true blessing in your life!