

Strong Willed Child

Winning the battle of wills

1 The Issue

While some children are relatively easy to parent, others can be quite a challenge. From the time of their birth (and sometimes earlier), you get the distinct impression this child is a “**My Way**” child! While all children have the potential to misbehave, given the right circumstances, the strong willed child is aptly named. Their attitude is “You may be bigger Mum and Dad, but I’m smarter.”

Where does such a strong will come from? This child has an inherited temperament that can

make them difficult to parent. Temperament is the inherited part of our personality – it’s how we are ‘wired’ when we’re born. Children with a strong will are not dysfunctional or maladjusted. These children are as charming, clever, and happy as other children are. But their strong will can lead to significant parental power struggles. The key to effectively parenting a strong willed child is to learn to work with your child’s temperament rather than against it.

2 Check it out

If your child exhibits many of the following characteristics you probably have a strong willed child.

- ◆ Have fast actions – eat, talk, walk fast
- ◆ Like to determine their own bedtime, even if they are exhausted
- ◆ Ignores the word “no”
- ◆ Try to walk early “Why crawl when I can walk!”
- ◆ Make their own rules
- ◆ Let you know what they want, and that they want it in a hurry
- ◆ Highly impatient with anything that’s slow
- ◆ Tell other children what to do
- ◆ Insists on having the best toy
- ◆ Fight to have their own way
- ◆ Like to control parents and friends
- ◆ Refuse to do what they don’t want to

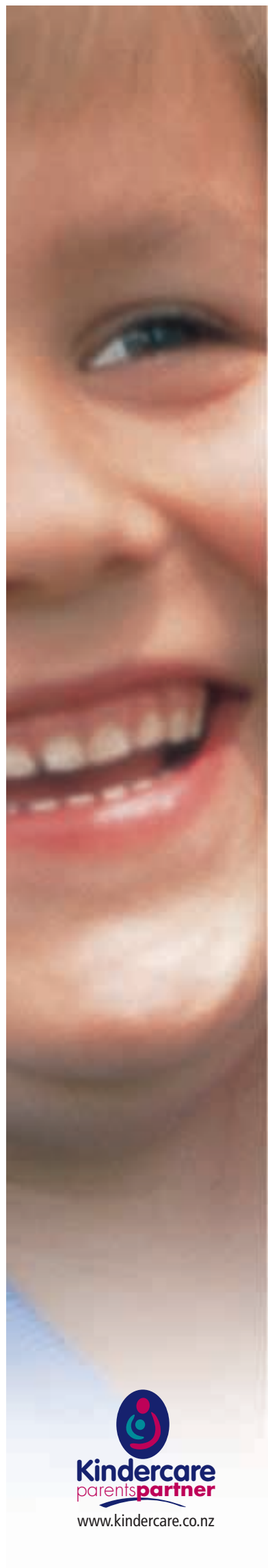
Expect that some children will be more difficult to parent than others because of their temperament. Don’t feel guilty that you are a bad parent. Parenting a strong willed child is never easy! Awareness takes away any false guilt a parent might have of their inadequacy for dealing with such a child.

3 How to Respond

Here are some solutions for dealing with a strong willed child.

Resist blaming, shaming, or humiliating your child.

A strong willed child can really frustrate a parent, but yelling, or demeaning your child just creates more fuel for the power struggle. It’s easy to label a strong willed child as being bad. But such labels colour your expectations, and reinforce the negative ways in which your child sees himself or herself.



Try to distinguish between behaviour that is really disobedient, and behaviour that is simply an extension of their temperament. Your child will always do better with love than ridicule.

Have clear limits

The strong willed child, more than any other, needs to know who is boss, and what the rules and expectations are. And expect them to test every limit you set! Read the Parents**Partner** Family Solutions sheet on "Setting limits", for how to do it effectively. And remember, once you set a limit, don't compromise by giving in. If you don't respect your limits neither will your strong willed son or daughter.

Limit the number of rules

Your child's nature might lead you to mistakenly think you have to have a rule for all their behaviour. Too many rules will create parental burnout in trying to enforce them, and it will also create a 'parent-deaf' child. That is, your child will simply filter out what you are saying. Choose your battles, and ignore the small stuff. A good question to ask when dealing with your child's misbehaviour is "Will this matter in a week from now?"

Acknowledge your child's feelings, even when you don't understand the behaviour

Empathising 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 that Mummy isn't allowing you to play with Sally's toy, but you are not allowed to push her."

Focus on your child's positive traits

Even strong willed children have wonderful strengths. So don't squash their energy, but channel it in constructive ways. If you focus on their excessive behaviour it's easy to become impatient, and have parental anxiety. But 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.

Praise and appreciate good behaviour

Be aware of what gets your attention, and therefore, could be perceived by your child as a reward - such as whining, crying, nagging, and yelling. A child figures it is better to get Dad or Mum's attention when I misbehaviour, than to not get it at all. So they will misbehave to get your attention. Give lots of attention when your child behaves correctly. When your child co-operates, quickly acknowledge and praise. Don't be overwhelmed by the times when they challenge your authority and your limits. There will be many times when they behave correctly. Be sure to affirm and appreciate them at such times.

The strong willed child is highly susceptible to parental nagging because they are always testing the limits! But there's a better way. Be a parent that creates a home environment where your child knows you are both on the same team. If your child feels you are always against them (playing on the opposite team), you will have a continuation of

disruption and disobedience. While acknowledging that a strong willed child presents a whole set of challenges for any parent, if you follow the above guidelines you will create connections with your child, so they know, and understand, that you are working with them to help them be their very best.