



Setting Limits with Your Strong-Willed Child, Revised and Expanded 2nd Edition: Eliminating Conflict by Establishing CLEAR, Firm, and Respectful Boundaries

By Robert J. Mackenzie

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In this fully revised and expanded second edition, *Setting Limits* author Robert MacKenzie is back with even more time-proven methods for dealing with misbehavior and creating positive, respectful, and rewarding relationships with children prone to acting out and disobedience.

Disruptive misbehavior, constant power struggles, manipulative or aggressive behavior--the challenges facing parents and teachers of strong-willed children can seem overwhelming at times. That's why thousands of parents and educators have turned to the solutions in *Setting Limits With Your Strong-Willed Child*. This revised and expanded second edition offers the most up-to-date alternatives to punishment and permissiveness--moving beyond traditional methods that wear you down and get you nowhere, and zeroing in on what really works so parents can use their energy in more efficient and productive ways. With fully updated guidelines on parenting tools like "logical consequences," and examples drawn directly from the modern world that children deal with each day, this is an invaluable resource for anyone wondering how to effectively motivate strong-willed children and instill proper conduct.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

ROBERT J. MACKENZIE, EdD, is an educational psychologist and family therapist who founded the *Setting Limits* program. He is the author of *Setting Limits* and *Setting Limits with Your Strong-Willed Child*.

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1

Understanding Your Strong-Willed Child

Four-year-old Corey is a challenge. He begins his typical day by refusing to wear the clothes his mother picks out, then dawdles for the next twenty minutes while she prods and pleads with him to put them on. When he arrives at the breakfast table, he turns up his nose and complains that he doesn't like what's offered. This is not a battle I want to fight, his mother says to herself as she prepares Corey his own special meal. She tells her husband that she worries about Corey's nutrition, but what she really worries about is the tantrum Corey will throw if he doesn't get what he wants. Her husband thinks she's too soft on Corey and so do her two daughters. "It's not fair!" they complain. "He always gets his own way." By the time Corey makes it out the door in the morning, his mother is ready for a nap. But this is only the beginning. Round two begins in the afternoon when Corey returns from preschool. Sometimes Corey's mother wonders how long she can take it.

Six-year-old Kristal is sweet and cooperative one moment, angry and defiant the next. Little things set her off—unexpected changes, departures from routine, or simply things not working out her way. Tantrums are not uncommon. "Living with Kristal is like riding on a roller coaster," says her mother. "It's exhausting!" Kristal's parents alternate between punishing and giving in, depending upon how worn down they feel; but nothing seems to make any difference. They wonder if Kristal's behavior is normal and question whether they did something to cause her to behave this way.

Nine-year-old Alex has a short fuse and often acts before he thinks. When things don't go his way at school or in the neighborhood, Alex gets loud, calls names, threatens, and sometimes hits other kids. Alex has been suspended from school three times this year for being disrespectful to teachers and fighting on the playground. It's only December. "It's too bad they don't spank kids at school anymore," Alex's father laments. "When Alex acts like a brat at home, we give him an earful, then we paddle him. He has to learn. We've threatened to take away his TV privileges for the rest of the year if he gets suspended again."

Lynn, age twelve, is destined to be a great trial lawyer. She's bright, intense, and very persistent. Lynn will argue with anyone if she thinks there's a chance of getting things to work out her way, and she's willing to use drama, rudeness, and disrespect when she believes it will help her win her case. "I never would have imagined talking to adults the way she talks to us," Lynn's father complains. "We reason with her every way we know, but everything turns into an argument."

Do any of these children sound familiar? If your child resembles one of these, you're not alone. I see more than a hundred children each year whom parents and teachers describe as challenging, difficult, spirited, stubborn, hell-raising, a pistol, or just plain impossible. Although no single term adequately describes all, or

even most, of the children I see, the one that comes closest is “strong-willed.” These are normal children with extreme behavior who are hard to raise and difficult to discipline.

Strong-willed children are not part of some conspiracy to make life difficult for others. They just do what strong-willed children do. They test harder and more often, resist longer, protest louder, use more drama, and carry things further than most of us would ever imagine. They’re movers and shakers, powerful kids who bring out strong reactions in others.

Teachers and principals know them as the 10 to 15 percent who cause 90 percent of school discipline problems. Parents know them as their big challenge. I know them affectionately as “my kids” because I spend a lot of my time with them, both at work and at home. Yes, I’m the proud parent of a strong-willed son. My youngest son is a delight, but he’s also a workout, and he’s not the least bit impressed by the fact that I write books on this subject or that I’m supposed to know what to do. At home, I get no breaks or professional immunity. He pushes hard against my rules and authority. At times, I’ve wondered whether his behavior is normal.

Strong-willed children are not part of some conspiracy to make life difficult for others. They just do what strong-willed children do. They test.

Do you sometimes question whether your child’s behavior is normal? Perhaps you worry that you’ve done something to cause your child to behave this way. If so, you’ll be relieved to know that the problem, in most cases, is not parents. Most are doing the best they can with the discipline tools they have. The problem is not the child, either. Most strong-willed children are just being themselves. The real problem is a bad match between the child’s temperament and the parents’ discipline methods. The parents’ tools are not well suited for the job. The predictable result—conflict and power struggles.

When parents arrive at my office looking for help in dealing with their strong-willed child, one of my first tasks is to assist them in understanding their child’s temperament. Then we examine how their discipline tools match up with their child’s temperament and discuss the predictable conflicts and friction points that develop around a bad match. That’s what we’re going to do in this chapter. A new perspective awaits you. You’re not the problem, but you are a big part of the solution. Improving the match is well within your control.

Who Is This Strong-Willed Child?

My youngest son, Ian, is a great force in our family and a great source of pride and joy. He’s bright, creative, sensitive, and very determined. Sometimes, I think he’s more determined to train his parents than we are to train him. He keeps us on our toes. If we are unclear, inconsistent, or indecisive when we ask him to do something, Ian lets us know. He holds out for a clearer signal.

Like most strong-willed children, Ian understands the “bottom line,” and he knows how to get there. He just pushes hard until he finds it, and when he does, he pushes a little more to see whether it holds up. If it does, he stops pushing, at least for a while, and accepts the boundary. But Ian pushes a lot before he gets there. It’s wearing! My older son, Scott, usually cooperates for the asking without all the pushing.

How would you react if you asked two children to cooperate in the same respectful manner and got two consistently different responses? Would you become upset? Would you question whether something is wrong?

The persistent testing that is so characteristic of strong-willed children is also what drives most parents crazy. Why would anyone do this? I'd ask myself. Is this normal? I would never push anyone as hard as Ian pushes me.

Does your child push hard against your rules and authority? Has he or she done so from an early age? Do you react in extreme ways and question whether your child is normal? Join the club. Now it's time to get better acquainted with your child. Following are some basic facts about strong-willed children that will help you better understand your child and your reactions to his or her behavior.

The persistent testing that is so characteristic of strong-willed children is also what drives most parents crazy.

- Strong-willed children are normal. You've probably worried about whether your child is normal when his teacher or a well-intended relative pointed out that his behavior seems extreme. They're right, but extreme does not mean abnormal. Most strong-willed children are normal with well-defined temperament traits. They're not brain damaged, emotionally disturbed, or defective. Most have no diagnosable problems at all, though some do. In addition, no rule says you can only have one thing going on in your life at a time. Some strong-willed children also have learning disabilities, hyperactivity, and other special needs, but a strong will does not mean they are abnormal.

- Strong-willed children are not all alike. Each strong-willed child is a special individual with his or her own unique temperament. No two behave in exactly the same way. Sure, they all test parents and behave in extreme ways, but they don't all test in the same way or to the same degree. Some are easier. Others are more difficult. Some are almost impossible.

- Strong-willed children are hard to understand. Our individual temperament shapes the way we think, learn, and behave. When others think and behave as we do, we can readily identify with them and understand their experience. When others think, learn, and behave very differently from us, however, it is not easy to understand them or to identify with their behavior. Why would anyone do that? we ask ourselves. The behavior makes no sense from our perspective. Strong-willed children are hard to understand for exactly this reason. As you learn about your child's temperament and how that temperament shapes the way your child behaves, behavior that once seemed confusing should begin to make sense.

When others think, learn, and behave very differently from us, it is not easy to understand them or to identify with their behavior.

- Strong-willed children require a lot of guidance and discipline. Of course, this statement sounds obvious: Children who test frequently require frequent discipline. Yet when you accept this statement as a fact of life rather than a source of annoyance, your attitude and perspective changes. Mine did. I stopped feeling so angry and resentful when my son tested me and developed patience I didn't believe was possible. I realized that his job was to test, and my job was to guide him in the right direction. Those are the hands each of us were dealt. My new perspective didn't change his behavior, but it sure made my life a lot easier. I stopped taking it personally.

- Strong-willed children do not respond to discipline methods that seem to work with other children. Why do children respond so differently to the same request? One cooperates, the other resists. Is the problem the resistant child? Or the request? Most parents feel confused when their best guidance efforts work with one child but not with another. The issue is less confusing when we consider the individual temperaments involved. Compliant children will cooperate with most discipline approaches, even ineffective ones, because their underlying desire is to cooperate. They have a different learning style than their strong-willed

counterparts. Compliant children permit parents a wide margin for ineffectiveness. Strong-willed children, on the other hand, do not respond to ineffective discipline. They require clear, firm, and consistent guidance. Ineffective discipline is a fast lane to power struggles with a strong-willed child.

Ineffective discipline is a fast lane to power struggles with a strong-willed child.

- Strong-willed children learn differently than their peers. Strong-willed children do much of their learning “the hard way.” That is, they often need to experience the consequences of their own choices and behavior before they can learn the lesson we’re trying to teach. It’s not enough just to announce that kicking the soccer ball in the house is not okay. Strong-willed children need to experience having the ball taken away for a while each time they decide to test the rule and kick the ball anyway. They may need to repeat this drill many times before they accept the rule as mandatory. Their behavior is not malicious, but can be very frustrating and confusing because it is so unlike that of compliant children who cooperate the first time they’re asked. Parents must learn to accept that “hard-way learning” is good learning for strong-willed children.
- Strong-willed children bring out extreme reactions in others. How do you feel when your child challenges your rules and authority? Angry? Frustrated? Confused? Threatened? Intimidated? Embarrassed? Guilty? Inadequate? Discouraged? Exhausted? All of the above? These are all normal reactions to extreme behavior. Strong-willed children often place strain on a marriage, cause sibling conflicts, and create other problems within the family.

The traits of strong-willed children that drive many of us crazy can actually become strengths when we give our kids the understanding and guidance they need to choose the right path.

- With proper guidance, strong-willed children can develop into dynamic, cooperative, and responsible individuals. Once you discover that your child has a strong will, the next question is: How are you going to deal with it? Your options are clear. You can fight with it and try to control it. You can give in to it and let it control you. You can try some of both. Or you can accept your child’s strong will as a fact of life, make peace with it, and learn better ways to guide him or her down a healthy path. The choice is yours. The traits of strong-willed children that drive many of us crazy can actually become strengths when we give our kids the understanding and guidance they need to head down the right path.

Discovering Your Child’s Temperament

When my son was born, there was no tag attached to his heel that said: Caution! Strong-willed child. Handle with Care. There were no warnings at all. I discovered his temperament the way most parents do. I watched it emerge as he grew up.

I had clues about his temperament from the beginning. He was colicky and screamed a lot during his first few months. He was picky and finicky when we introduced solid foods. Mornings were the hardest. He was slow to get going and cranky. For some reason, his schedule never seemed to match up with the rest of ours.

But Ian didn’t put his cards out on the table until he was eight and a half months old. One Saturday morning, while I was sitting on the couch reading the newspaper, I saw Ian pull himself up to a standing position. Watch out! I thought to myself. We’re entering the furniture-walking phase. His older brother went through this phase about the same age, and I thought I knew what was ahead. But to my amazement, Ian let go of the furniture and walked all the way across the living room! When he got to the end, he plunked down, then pulled himself up and did it again. Wow!

I called my wife in the other room to come see Ian walk. When she arrived, I tried my best to get him to do it again. I pleaded, begged, coaxed, and cajoled, but Ian wouldn't budge. He just sat there with this look on his face that said, Watch out. I'm Ian. Nearly two weeks went by before he walked again; but when he did, he did it the way he prefers to do most things—on his terms. Looking back, I realize this was one of those defining moments.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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