

10 Tips for Parents of Strong-Willed Toddlers and Preschoolers

Romans 12:12 – Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer

1. Start your day with prayer. Pray for strength, wisdom, guidance, endurance, patience and harmony in your household.
2. Do your research – there are lots of books with lots of theories on parenting strong-willed children. I have a stack of about ten books on the subject. I take bits and pieces from some, pass on others and love one or two. Parenting isn't a cookie cutter process so read books, listen to talks, seek advice from others who have been down this road, and figure out the best strategies for your family.
3. Connect with other parents of strong-willed kiddos. There is freedom and comfort in being in a "safe zone" of friends who understand and empathize with your child's behavior.
4. Get creative with achieving your goals. Ex: I want my child to wear a jacket. I give him the choice of either his brown one or his blue one. He feels like his opinion matters, he feels power in getting to make a choice, and as the parent I'm still reaching my goal.
5. We practice this exchange all the time and use it in conflict.
Me: Who is in charge?
Child: Mommy and Daddy are in charge.
Me: And what is your job?
Child: To listen and obey.
We say this so often that the words can roll right off my son's tongue. In tough conflict he will often refuse to answer or sometimes if he's feeling especially spunky he'll say "Just Daddy is in charge" or "I am!". Any wrong answers result in time out until he is able to give the correct response. The correct response typically leads to a change in behavior.
6. Sometimes when you find yourself frustrated it's the time your child most needs to feel loved and secure. Hugs, snuggles, kind words, reading a book or a change of scenery can go a long way for everyone.
7. Pick your battles wisely. Win them. Don't compare your battles to other parents'.
8. Parenting is not just for your child's benefit. God is writing your family's story for His glory. Ask Him what He is trying to teach you and let Him refine you.
9. Fight the urge to feel ashamed, embarrassed, or like you are failing as a parent. When those thoughts creep in, take them captive and turn them over to the Lord.
10. Memorize scripture filled with God's promises and wisdom. Hide it in your heart. Cling to it. It doesn't return void.

(Excerpt from a parenting blog post I wrote in 2012)

Here are some of the struggles we face having a strong-willed child:

- 1) It's exhausting – long days of engaging in the same battles, days and weeks on end
- 2) It's easy to compare him to compliant kids and be discouraged
- 3) I am often embarrassed
- 4) I feel like my parenting skills are judged
- 5) Fear and anxiety over his safety. His knowledge of boundaries often leads to testing of boundaries, and even upon receiving a consequence, crossing the boundaries again.

We are encouraged by knowing:

- 1) He is designed by God, made for His perfect purpose and glory (Ps 139:14)
- 2) He is a gift to us from the Lord, and all of God's gifts are good (Ps 127:3, James 1:17)
- 3) We are totally in love with our child even in the battle of wills, which gives us such a beautiful picture of God's love for us as His imperfect children (Romans 5:8)

So, my job as a parent to a strong-willed child is:

- 1) PRAY... for him, for patience, guidance, wisdom, strength, his future, and that God would capture his heart and use this gift for His glory
- 2) Refuse to believe or to let others believe that that there is something wrong with how God made him.
- 3) Don't compare him to other kids. We all need Jesus. Sin is usually more evident in strong-willed kiddos so it is easy to forget that the compliant, people-pleasing ones have their own sin struggles and are in equal need of a Savior.
- 4) Make sure my husband and I are on the same page as far as what our training goals are each week. We identify 2-3 specific goals and strategize together.
- 5) Be secure in my parenting solely because I'm surrendering it daily to the Lord.
- 6) Be consistent, firm, and clear with expectations and consequences.
- 7) Keep on keeping on. Sow seeds. Persevere. Stay calm (and ask for forgiveness when I don't). Direct him to God and His truth while running hard after the Lord myself.