

## The Strong-Willed/Spirited Child: 5 Tips to help parents get through the day



There is no question that you love your child unconditionally, through good days and bad.

But have you noticed that there have been way more “bad” days than “good” ones lately?

**Here are some questions you can ask yourself if you find you’ve been butting heads with your little one:**

1. Do you refer to your child as “difficult” or “stubborn”?
2. Does your child test the limits through every daily routine?
3. Does your child have endless energy?
4. Does your child want to do everything by him/herself?
5. Do you feel like your days are full of power struggles?
6. Do you feel that none of the parenting strategies that you read about work with your child?
7. Does your child seem to be immune to “time-out”?

**If you answered, “yes” to most of these questions, then you can be sure you have a strong-willed child!**

Without a doubt, strong-willed or “spirited” children can be a challenge to raise. They will never back down from an argument, they want to feel control over their lives, and they would rather cut off their arm than to give in or admit they were wrong!

*Spirited children can also be some of the most caring, sensitive and fun-loving children you know. As parents, we need to understand what makes spirited children tick and learn ways to interact without breaking their spirit.*

The following tips can help parents get through the day with your strong-willed child without breaking their spirit:

### **Give Them Control (But Stick to The Rules!)**

Since they want to be in control or have mastery over their world, let them make as many decisions as they can about their day-to-day lives.

Set up reward charts and visual schedules to help remind your child what needs to be done. These systems need to be simple and predictable.

Here is an excellent example of a morning schedule that gives your child control over their routine, while still laying out ground rules on what needs to be done when, and in what order:



Checklist courtesy [ishouldbemoppingthefloor.com](http://ishouldbemoppingthefloor.com)

Once these systems are in place, you do not need to get into a power struggle over what needs to be done or over what your child is wearing in the morning.

If clothing is an issue, then have a system where on a Sunday you let your child pick out the outfits he/she wants to wear for the week. Place them in plastic bags or put them on a shelf with the day of the week labeled on it. This may take a little time and preparation but this time up front will go a long way to making your morning's go smoother and more peaceful.

Once strong-willed children know the rules, this gives them the control as well as teaches them responsibility early on.

### **Make Sure Their Basic Needs Are Met**

Like all of us, strong-willed children are more irritable and less rational when they are tired, hungry or need attention.

So, before you get upset with your little one when he/she is having a level 5 meltdown in the mall at 3pm and you push to get to one more store, stop and think for a moment.

When was the last time they were fed? Did they just miss their afternoon nap? Have they been on their feet following you from store to store for hours?

Your little one does not have as much control and cannot think as rationally as grown-ups do. Asking them to stay strong through one last stop might sound like the end of the world to them! Their basic needs must be met much quicker than an adult's do.

### **Keep Your Voice Calm**

This is not easy, but if your strong-willed child feels that you are being affected by his/her uncontrollable behavior, then they will keep doing it!

If you find it difficult to stay calm in the moment, take a time out for yourself. Go into the bathroom and take 10 deep breaths. Once you are a bit calmer, then come out.

Your calm behavior will at first infuriate your child, but with practice he/she will see that this way of engaging you will not work.

### **Offer Choices (With Boundaries)**

Give your strong-willed child as many choices as possible, within boundaries you are comfortable with.

When you bark orders to a strong-willed child, their first reaction is to push back. Giving choices puts them into the driver's seat; mastery of their own world means everything to them.

For example, instead of saying, "Let's go and get ready for bath", you can say one of the following:

– "It's time for your bath, do you want to read books before or after?"

– “It’s time to get ready for your bath, go and find which toys you would like to bring in with you.”

– “It’s time for bath, let’s see how fast you can get up the stairs, I will count: ready, set, go!”

### **Show Respect and Empathy**

This is probably the most important point. Your child wants to be understood and will fight, until they feel that they are. You need to convey that you are empathetic to the problem at hand, even if you do not agree.

For example, imagine that your child is upset because he/she has to leave for school but wants to continue to play.

You really need to leave now, but want to offer empathy for how he/she feels. Set the limit by being firm yet loving: “I know you are having fun and you are angry because you don’t want to leave your toys, but we have to leave. If your child is still upset, give him/her an offer, “Bring one toy that you want into the car and you can continue to play until we get to school”.

Showing your child that you understand why they are upset will help them better cope with their own frustration. This, combined with the other tips mentioned above, should help guide you and your strong-willed child towards calmer, more understanding interactions!

You cannot change your child (and you know you wouldn’t want to change them for the world!), but you can control how situations are handled.