

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

James C. Dobson

Temper Your Child's Tantrums



*How firm, loving discipline
will lead to a more peaceful home*

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Temper Your Child's Tantrums: How Firm, Loving Discipline Will Lead to a More Peaceful Home

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INTRODUCTION

Every Parent Needs a Game Plan

A woman with seven rambunctious children boarded a Los Angeles bus and sat in the seat behind me. Her hair was a mess, and the gaunt look on her face revealed a state of utter exhaustion. As she stumbled past me with her wiggling tribe, I asked, "Do all these children belong to you, or is this some kind of picnic?"

She looked at me through sunken eyes and said, "They're all mine, and believe me, it's *no* picnic!"

I smiled to myself, understanding fully what she meant. Small children have an uncanny ability to unravel an adult nervous system. They can be noisy and they make incredible messes and they bicker with one another and their noses drip and they throw temper tantrums and they have more energy in their fat little fingers than Mama has in her entire weary body.

PARENTHOOD: MORE DIFFICULT THAN IT LOOKS

There's no doubt about it: children are expensive little people. To raise them properly will require the *very best* that you can give of your time, effort, and financial resources.

However, to those who have never experienced parenthood, the job may appear ridiculously simple. Such people remind me of a man watching the game of golf for the first time, thinking, "That looks easy. All you have to do is hit that little white ball out there in the direction of the flag." He then steps up to the tee, draws back his club, and dribbles the "little white ball" about nine feet to the left. Accordingly, I should warn those who have not yet assumed the responsibilities of parenthood: the game of raising kids is more difficult than it looks.

So parenthood is costly and complex. Am I suggesting, then, that newly married couples should remain childless?

Certainly not! The family that loves children and wants to experience the thrill of procreation should not be frightened by the challenge of parenthood. Speaking from my own perspective as a father, there have been no greater moments in my life than when I gazed into the eyes of my infant daughter, and five years later, my son.

What could be more exciting than seeing those tiny human beings begin to blossom and grow and learn and love?

And what reward could be more meaningful than having my little boy or girl climb onto my lap

as I sit by the fire, hug my neck and whisper, “I love you, Dad.”

Oh, yes, *children are expensive, but they're worth the price*. Besides, nothing worth having comes cheap.

IN SEARCH OF A COURSE

Many of the frustrations of parenthood occur because we have no well-designed model or “game plan” to follow in response to the inevitable circumstances that develop. Then when the routine, predictable problems occur, we try to muddle through by random trial and error.

Parents who follow this course remind me of a friend who flew his single-engine airplane toward a small country airport. He arrived as the sun was dropping behind a mountain at the close of the day, and by the time he had maneuvered his plane into position to land, he could not see the hazy field below. He had no lights on his plane, and no one was on duty at the airport.

He circled the runway for another attempt to land, but the darkness had then become even more impenetrable. For two hours he flew his plane around and around in the blackness of night, knowing that he faced certain death when his fuel was expended.

Then, as panic gripped him, a miracle occurred. Someone on the ground heard the continuing drone of his engine and realized his predicament. That merciful man drove his car back and forth on the runway to show my friend the location of the airstrip, and then let his lights

cast their beam from the far end while the plane landed.

I think of that story whenever I am descending at night in a commercial airliner. As I look ahead, I can see the green lights bordering the runway which tell the captain where to direct the plane. If he stays between those lighted boundaries, all will be well. There is safety in the illuminated zone, but disaster lies to the left or right.

Isn't that what we need as parents? There should be clearly marked boundaries that tell us where to steer the family ship. We require some guiding *principles* that will help us raise our children in safety and health.

HOPE FOR THE STRONG-WILLED CHILD

My purpose in writing this book is to provide some of those understandings that will contribute to competent parenthood. We will deal particularly with the subject of discipline as it relates to the "strong-willed child." Most parents have at least one such youngster who seems to be born with a clear idea of how he wants the world to be operated and an intolerance for those who disagree. Even in infancy, he fairly bristles when his dinner is late and he insists that someone hold him during every waking hour. Later, during toddlerhood, he declares total war on all forms of authority, at home or abroad, and his greatest thrill comes from drawing on the walls and flushing kitties down the toilet. His parents are often guilt-ridden and frustrated people who wonder where they've gone wrong and why

their home life is so different than they were led to expect.

We'll be investigating this self-propelled youngster during his progression through childhood, including infancy, toddlerhood, elementary school years, and pre-adolescence. It is my firm conviction that the strong-willed child usually possesses more creative potential and strength of character than his compliant siblings, provided his parents can help him channel his impulses and gain control of his rampaging will. My writings are dedicated to this purpose.

In short, this book is designed to provide *practical* advice and suggestions to parents who may be reacting to these more difficult challenges without design or forethought. And if I've been successful, this discourse may offer a lighted runway to pilots who circle in the darkness above.

Battle of the Wills

The Dobson household consists of a mother and father, a boy and a girl, one hamster, a parakeet, one lonely goldfish, and two hopelessly neurotic cats. We all live together in relative harmony with a minimum of conflict and strife.

But there is another member of our “family” who is less congenial and cooperative. He is a stubborn twelve-pound dachshund named Sigmund Freud (Siggie), who honestly believes he owns the place. All dachshunds tend to be somewhat independent, I’m told, but Siggie is a confirmed revolutionary. He’s not vicious or mean; he just wants to run things—and the two of us have been engaged in a power struggle for the past twelve years.

Siggie is not only stubborn, but he doesn’t pull his own weight in the family. He won’t bring in the newspaper on cold mornings; he refuses to “chase a ball” for the children; he doesn’t keep the gophers out of the garden; and he can’t do any of the usual tricks that most cultured dogs

perform. Alas, Siggie has refused to participate in any of the self-improvement programs I have initiated on his behalf. He is content just to trot through life, watering and sniffing and stopping to smell the roses.

Furthermore, Sigmund is not even a good watchdog. This suspicion was confirmed the night we were visited by a prowler who had entered our backyard at three o'clock in the morning. I suddenly awoke from a deep sleep, got out of bed, and felt my way through the house without turning on the lights. I knew someone was on the patio and Siggie knew it, too, because the little coward was crouched behind me!

After listening to the thumping of my heart for a few minutes, I reached out to take hold of the rear doorknob. At that moment, the backyard gate quietly opened and closed. Someone had been standing three feet from me, and that "someone" was now tinkering in my garage.

Siggie and I held a little conversation in the darkness and decided that he should be the one to investigate the disturbance. I opened the back door and told my dog to "attack!" But Siggie just *had* one! He stood there throbbing and shaking so badly that I couldn't even push him out the back door. In the noise and confusion that ensued, the intruder escaped (which pleased both dog *and* man).

WHO'S BOSS?

Please don't misunderstand me. Siggie is a member of our family and we love him dearly. And

despite his anarchistic nature, I have finally taught him to obey a few simple commands. However, we had some classic battles before he reluctantly yielded to my authority.

The greatest confrontation occurred a few years ago when I had been in Miami for a three-day conference. I returned to observe that Siggie had become boss of the house while I was gone. But I didn't realize until later that evening just how strongly he felt about his new position as Captain.

At eleven o'clock that night, I told Siggie to go get into his bed, which is a permanent enclosure in the family room. For six years I had given him that order at the end of each day, and for six years Siggie had obeyed.

On this occasion, however, he refused to budge. You see, he was in the bathroom, seated comfortably on the furry lid of the toilet seat. That is his favorite spot in the house, because it allows him to bask in the warmth of a nearby electric heater. (Incidentally, Siggie had to learn the hard way that it is extremely important that the lid be *down* before he leaves the ground. I'll never forget the night he learned that lesson. He came thundering in from the cold, sailed through the air—and nearly drowned before I could get him out.)

When I told Sigmund to leave his warm seat and go to bed, he flattened his ears and slowly turned his head toward me. He deliberately braced himself by placing one paw on the edge of the furry lid, then hunched his shoulders, raised

his lips to reveal the molars on both sides, and uttered his most threatening growl. That was Siggie's way of saying, "Get lost!"

I had seen this defiant mood before, and knew there was only one way to deal with it. The *only* way to make Siggie obey is to threaten him with destruction. Nothing else works. I turned and went to my closet and got a small belt to help me "reason" with Mr. Freud. My wife, who was watching this drama unfold, tells me that as soon as I left the room, Siggie jumped from his perch and looked down the hall to see where I had gone. Then he got behind her and growled.

When I returned, I held up the belt and again told my angry dog to go get into his bed. He stood his ground, so I gave him a firm swat across the rear end, and he tried to bite the belt. I hit him again and he tried to bite *me*.

What developed next is impossible to describe. That tiny dog and I had the most vicious fight ever staged between man and beast. I fought him up one wall and down the other, with both of us scratching and clawing and growling and swinging the belt. I am embarrassed by the memory of the entire scene. Inch by inch I moved him toward the family room and his bed. As a final desperate maneuver, Siggie jumped up on the couch and backed into the corner for one last snarling stand. I eventually got him to bed, but only because I outweighed him 200 to 12!

The following night I expected another siege of combat at Siggie's bedtime. To my surprise,

however, he accepted my command without debate or complaint, and simply trotted toward the family room in perfect submission. In fact, that fight occurred more than four years ago, and from that time to this, Siggie has never made another “go for broke” stand.

It is clear to me now that Siggie was saying in his canine way, “I don’t think you’re tough enough to make me obey.” Perhaps I seem to be humanizing the behavior of a dog, but I think not. Veterinarians will confirm that some breeds of dogs, notably dachshunds and shepherds, will not accept the leadership of their masters until human authority has stood the test of fire and proved itself worthy.

But this is not a book about the discipline of dogs; there is an important moral to my story that is highly relevant to the world of children. *Just as surely as a dog will occasionally challenge the authority of his leaders, so will a little child—only more so.*

This is no minor observation, for it represents a characteristic of human nature which is rarely recognized (or admitted) by the “experts” who write books on the subject of discipline. I have yet to find a text for parents or teachers that acknowledges the struggle—the exhausting confrontation of wills—most parents and teachers experience regularly with their children. Adult leadership is rarely accepted unchallenged by the next generation; it must be “tested” and found worthy of allegiance by the youngsters who are asked to yield and submit to its direction.

WHY CHILDREN CHALLENGE AUTHORITY

Why are children so pugnacious? Everyone knows that they are lovers of justice and law and order and secure boundaries. The writer of the book of Hebrews in the Bible even said that an undisciplined child feels like an illegitimate son or daughter, not even belonging to his family. Why, then, can't parents resolve all conflicts by the use of quiet discussions and explanations and gentle pats on the head?

The answer is found in the curious value system of children that respects strength and courage (when combined with love). What better explanation can be given for the popularity of the mythical Superman and Captain Marvel and Wonder Woman in the folklore of children? Why else do children proclaim, "My dad can beat up your dad!"? (One child replied to that statement, "That's nothing. My *mom* can beat up my dad, too!")

A HIERARCHY OF STRENGTH

You see, boys and girls care about the issue of "who's toughest." Whenever a youngster moves into a new neighborhood or a new school district, he usually has to fight (either verbally or physically) to establish himself in the hierarchy of strength. Anyone who understands children knows that there is a "top dog" in every group, and there is a poor little defeated pup at the bottom of the heap. And every child between those extremes knows where he stands in relation to the others.

Recently my wife and I had an opportunity to observe this social hierarchy in action. We invited

the fourteen girls in our daughter's fifth-grade class to our home for a slumber party. It was a noble gesture, but I can tell you with sincerity that we will never do that again. It was an exhausting and sleepless night of giggling and wiggling and jumping and bumping. But it was also a very interesting evening, from a social point of view.

The girls began arriving at five o'clock on Friday night, and their parents returned to pick them up at eleven o'clock Saturday morning. I met most of them for the first time that weekend, yet during those seventeen hours together, I was able to identify every child's position in the hierarchy of respect and strength.

There was one queen bee who was boss of the crowd. Everyone wanted to do what she suggested, and her jokes brought raucous laughter. Then a few degrees below her was the number two princess, followed by three, four, and five. At the bottom of the list was a harassed little girl who was alienated and rejected by the entire herd. Her jokes were as clever (I thought) as those of the leader, yet no one laughed when she clowned. Her suggestions of a game or event were immediately condemned as stupid and foolish. I found myself defending this isolated girl because of the injustice of her situation. Unfortunately, there is a similar outcast or loser in every group of three or more kids (of either sex). Such is the nature of childhood.

**Children want to know how “tough”
their leaders are.**

This respect for strength and courage also makes children want to know how “tough” their leaders are. They will occasionally disobey parental instructions for the precise purpose of testing the determination of those in charge. Thus, whether you are a parent or grandparent or Boy Scout leader or bus driver or Brownie leader or schoolteacher, I can guarantee that sooner or later, one of the children under your authority will clench his little fist and challenge your leadership. Like Siggie at bedtime, he will convey this message by his disobedient manner: “I don’t think you are tough enough to make me do what you say.”

GAMES CHILDREN PLAY

This defiant game, called Challenge the Chief, can be played with surprising skill by very young children. Recently a father told me of taking his three-year-old daughter to a basketball game. The child was, of course, interested in everything in the gym except the athletic contest.

The father permitted her to roam free and climb on the bleachers, but he set up definite limits regarding how far she could stray. He took her by the hand and walked with her to a stripe painted on the gym floor. “You can play all around the building, Janie, but don’t go past this line,” he instructed her.

He had no sooner returned to his seat than the toddler scurried in the direction of the forbidden territory. She stopped at the border for a moment, then flashed a grin over her shoulder to her father, and deliberately placed one foot over the line as if to say, “Whacha gonna do about it?”

Virtually every parent the world over has been asked the same question at one time or another.

The entire human race is afflicted with the same tendency toward willful defiance that this three-year-old exhibited. Her behavior in the gym is not so different from the folly of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God had told them they could eat *anything* in the Garden except the forbidden fruit (“do not go past this line”). Yet they challenged the authority of the Almighty by deliberately disobeying His commandment. Perhaps this tendency toward self-will is the essence of “original sin” which has infiltrated the human family. It certainly explains why I place such stress on the proper response to willful defiance during childhood, for that rebellion can plant the seeds of personal disaster. The thorny weed which it produces may grow into a tangled briar patch during the troubled days of adolescence.

When a parent refuses to accept his child’s defiant challenge, something changes in their relationship. The youngster begins to look at his mother and father with disrespect; they are unworthy of his allegiance. More important, he wonders why they would let him do such harmful things if they really loved him.

The ultimate paradox of childhood: boys and girls want to be led by their parents, but insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them.

TWO KINDS OF KIDS

I have been watching infants and toddlers during recent years, and have become absolutely convinced that at the moment of birth there exists in children an inborn temperament which will play a role throughout life.

Though I would have denied the fact fifteen years ago, I am now certain that the personalities of newborns vary tremendously, even before parental influence is exercised. Every mother of two or more children will affirm that each of her infants had a different personality—a different “feel”—beginning with the first time they were held.

Numerous authorities in the field of child development now agree that these complex little creatures called babies are far from “blank slates” when they enter the world. One important study by Chess, Thomas, and Birch revealed nine kinds of behaviors in which babies differ from one another. These differences tend to persist into later life and include level of activity, responsiveness, distractibility, and moodiness, among others.

Another newborn characteristic (not mentioned by Chess) relates to a feature that can be called “strength of the will.”

1. *The compliant child.* Some children seem to be born with an easygoing, compliant attitude toward external authority. As infants they don't cry very often and they sleep through the night from the second week and they goo at the grandparents and they smile while being diapered and

they're very patient when dinner is overdue. And, of course, they never spit up on the way to church.

During later childhood, they love to keep their rooms clean and they especially like to do their homework and they can entertain themselves for hours. There aren't many of these supercompliant children, I'm afraid, but they are known to exist in some households (not my own).

2. *The strong-willed child.* Just as surely as some children are naturally compliant, there are others who seem to be defiant upon exit from the womb. They come into the world smoking a cigar and yelling about the temperature in the delivery room and the incompetence of the nursing staff and the way things are run by the administrator of the hospital. They expect meals to be served the instant they are ordered, and they demand every moment of mother's time. As the months unfold, their expression of willfulness becomes even more apparent, the winds reaching hurricane force during toddlerhood.

In thinking about these compliant and defiant characteristics of children, I sought an illustration to explain the vastly differing thrust of human temperaments. I found an appropriate analogy in a supermarket shortly thereafter.

Imagine yourself in a grocery store, pushing a wire cart up the aisle. You give the basket a small shove and it glides at least nine feet out in front, and then comes to a gradual stop. You walk along, happily tossing in the soup and ketchup bottles and loaves of bread. Marketing is such

an easy task, for even when the cart is burdened with goods, it can be directed with one finger.

But buying groceries is not always so blissful. On other occasions, you select a shopping cart that ominously awaits your arrival at the front of the market. When you push the stupid thing forward, it tears off to the left and knocks over a stack of bottles. Refusing to be outmuscled by an empty cart, you throw all of your weight behind the handle, fighting desperately to keep the ship on course. It seems to have a mind of its own as it darts toward the eggs and careens back in the direction of the milk and almost crushes a terrified grandmother in green tennis shoes. You are trying to do the same shopping assignment that you accomplished with ease the week before, but the job feels more like combat duty today. You are exhausted by the time you herd the rebellious cart toward the checkout stand.

What is the difference between the two shopping baskets? Obviously, one has straight, well-oiled wheels which go where they are guided. The other has crooked, bent wheels that refuse to yield.

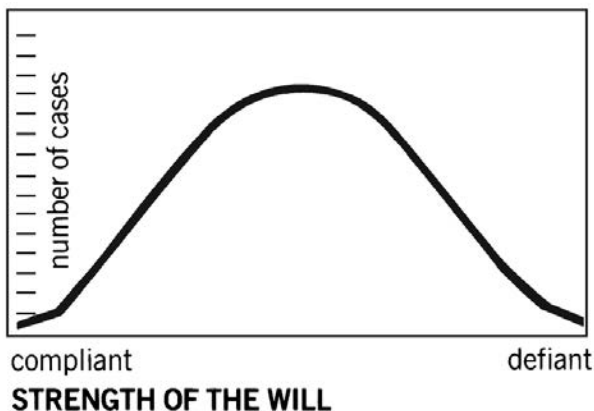
Do you recognize how this illustration relates to children? We might as well face it, some kids have “crooked wheels”! They do not want to go where they are led, for their own inclinations would take them in other directions.

Furthermore, the mother who is “pushing the cart” must expend seven times the energy to make it move, compared with the parent of a child with “straight, well-oiled wheels.” (Only

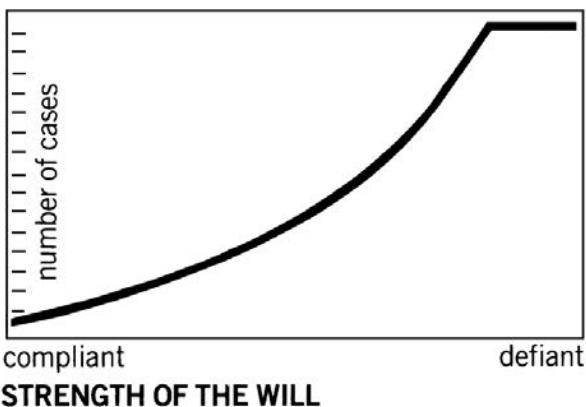
mothers of strong-willed children will *fully* comprehend the meaning of this illustration.)

IS YOUR CHILD TYPICAL?

But how does the “typical” or “average” child respond? My original assumption was that children in the Western world probably represented a “normal” or bell-shaped curve with regard to strength of the will. In other words, I presumed there were a few very compliant kids and an equally small number who were defiant, but the great majority of youngsters were likely to fall somewhere near the middle of the distribution.



However, having talked to at least 25,000 harried parents, I’m convinced that my supposition was wrong. The true distribution probably is depicted in the following chart. (Don’t take this observation too literally, for perhaps it only *seems* that the majority of toddlers are trying to conquer the world.)



SIBLINGS: OPPOSITE ENDS OF THE SPECTRUM

There is another phenomenon I have never been able to explain, relating to sibling relationships. When there are two children in the family, it is likely that one youngster will be *compliant* and the other *defiant*.

The easygoing child is often a genuine charmer. He smiles at least sixteen hours a day and spends most of his time trying to figure out what his parents want and how he can make them happy. In reality, he *needs* their praise and approval; thus his personality is greatly influenced by this desire to gain their affection and recognition.

The second child is approaching life from the opposite vantage point. He is sliding all four brakes and trying to gain control of the family steering mechanism. Can you see how these differences in temperament lay the foundation for serious sibling rivalry and resentment?

The defiant child faces constant discipline and hears many threats and finger-wagging lectures, while his angelic brother, little Goody-Two-Shoes, polishes his halo and soaks up the warmth of parental approval. The two are pitted against each other by the nature of their divergent personalities, and may spend a lifetime scratching and clawing one another.

DOS AND DON'TS FOR BATTLE-WORN PARENTS

There are several other observations that may be helpful to the parents of a strong-willed child.

1. Do acknowledge the guilt and anxiety that you, as a conscientious parent, commonly feel. You are engaged in an all-out tug-of-war that naturally leaves you frustrated and fatigued. No one told you that parenthood would be this difficult!

2. Don't blame yourself for the tension that arises between you and your strong-willed child. Many people plan to be such loving and effective parents, reading fairy stories to their pajama-clad angels by the fireplace. The difference between life as it is and life as it ought to be can be a frightening and distressing bit of reality.

3. Don't be intimidated by the parents of compliant children who don't understand your difficulties with your defiant youngsters.

4. Do ignore comments that imply, "If you would raise your kids the way I do it, you wouldn't be having those awful problems." Statements like these only intensify guilt and anxiety.

5. Do take courage in the fact that the willful

child can be difficult to control even when his parents handle him with great skill and dedication. It may take several years to bring him to a point of relative obedience and cooperation within the family unit.

6. Don't try to complete the transformation overnight. While this training program is in progress, it is important not to panic.

7. Do treat your child with sincere love and dignity, but require him to follow your leadership.

8. Do choose carefully the matters which are worthy of confrontation, then accept his challenge on those issues and *win* decisively.

9. Do reward every positive, cooperative gesture your child makes by offering your attention, affection, and verbal praise.

THE KEY TO YOUR CHILD'S POTENTIAL

The most urgent advice I can give the parents of an assertive, independent child concerns the importance of beginning to shape his will during the *early* years.

I honestly believe, though the assumption is difficult to prove, that the defiant youngster is in a "high risk" category for antisocial behavior later in life. He is more likely to challenge his teachers in school and question the values he has been taught and shake his fist in the faces of those who would lead him. I believe he is more inclined toward sexual promiscuity and drug abuse and academic difficulties.

This is not an inevitable prediction, of course, because the complexities of the human personal-

ity make it impossible to forecast behavior with complete accuracy. I must also stress that the overall picture is not negative. It would appear that the strong-willed child may possess more character and have greater potential for a productive life than his compliant counterpart.

However, the realization of that potential may depend on a firm but loving early home environment. Thus, I repeat my admonition: *Begin shaping the will of that child while he is in toddlerhood.* (Notice that I did not say *crush* the will, or destroy it, or snuff it out. The “how to” of this recommendation will provide the subject matter of subsequent chapters.)