

Strong-Willed Children are a Blessing But...

By Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN

Jimmy was in trouble at school again. He has a hard time listening to the teacher, struggles with talking out, and distracts the other children. Part of Jimmy's problem is defiance and the other part has to do with his impulsivity and lack of self-control.

Here's the plan the school was using. The teacher taped a card to his desk and each time he talked out or distracted someone she would have him put a tally mark on the card. Then at the end of the day, he took the card home for a signature from Mom or Dad. This plan wasn't working. Jimmy was still talking out and not listening to the teacher.

Here's the problem. Jimmy is what is typically called, "a strong-willed child." These children know what they want and are not easily deterred. They're often driven, inflexible, and know how others should fit into their plans. They have the determination to face resistance, even if that resistance is some kind of authority in their lives. This determination can be an asset, but only if it's heading in the right direction.

The reality is that strong-willed kids will likely be leaders in the future, and they demonstrate many of those qualities now. However, all good leaders need to learn how to follow and if not trained, these kids can become tyrants. So, parents of these gifted children have their work cut out for them.

We're finding more and more that strong-willed kids challenge the typical behavior modification system of rewards and punishment. Parents lament, "nothing works." They say, "He doesn't care if I take everything away, he won't change." "She doesn't care about the star chart, the trip this weekend, or dessert."

Let's stop right there. In that simple truth, the key to parenting strong-willed children is revealed. Children who are characterized as "strong-willed" have an internal motivation toward their agenda, and are less affected by external motivations so a heart-based approach is essential. This internal motivation is a gift, but it means that the way we work with them may need to change.

A parent or teacher's use of rewards and punishment has less influence on strong-willed kids because their existing motivation is coming from inside.

Question: How do we help this internally motivated child move in the right direction? Answer: Parents must learn to mold and guide that internal motivation.

Here's what worked with Jimmy. With some guidance the parents explored other tools besides reward and punishment. We were all on the hunt for a Jimmy-solution. The approach itself created more responsiveness in Jimmy as he became part of the plan.

First, with a team approach, we explored the problem a little more. Jimmy helped identify two areas in particular where he tended to talk out, when he was finished before the other kids on an in-class assignment, and when he was switching subjects to get the next material out of his desk. There were other times to be sure, but now we had two arenas in which to work.

Next, we developed a plan. What could Jimmy do instead and how would he remind himself to do it? He determined that when he was done with his classwork he would put his pencil down and say to himself, "Wait quietly." When he was getting things out of his desk he would remind himself to "Shift quietly." (Those were his words. He understood them, so those became a part of the plan.)

But one more step was necessary. We asked him why the teacher was unhappy with his talking? And why would he want to change? His answer was that the talking bothered other students. As we talked about "Why?" he wanted to change, he added, "Because I want to be known as a person who is thoughtful of others."



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Together we talked about thoughtfulness, why it's valuable, and how it might help him in the future. As the process continued Jimmy was starting to demonstrate signs of hope. We all realized that we were reaching his heart and that we were coming to a good "Jimmy solution."

But we weren't done. We wrapped all of the work into a plan. We empowered the teacher to simply ask two more questions after she asked Jimmy to put down his tally mark. First, "What should you be saying to yourself?" and Second, "Why?" The answers were written right on the card for him to read back.

With some coaching over the next two weeks dramatic improvement took place. Jimmy was developing self-control in class. The teacher expanded the plan to include other areas such as talking in the hall. Mom and Dad worked on similar things at home. When Jimmy entered a room, instead of just taking over the conversation, they required him to wait and interrupt graciously. In each case, the Jimmy plan moved him forward.

This heart-based approach worked for several reasons. It transferred the responsibility to the child. Instead of the typical approach of giving a child a plan, Jimmy helped develop a plan that would work for him. Dad, Mom, and the teachers changed their role from being policemen to being coaches, moving them from a critical approach to an encouraging one. The plan was specific and focused on the solution instead of simply pointing out the problem.

All children need a combination of firmness, hope, visioning, teaching, coaching, and a heavy dose of prayer. But these components are most important when kids are strong-willed. Other kids might respond to most any technique. You can just frown at some kids and they're sensitive enough to change. But the strong-willed child has a gift of inner strength and only when you work in conjunction with that internal motivation will you see significant change.

There are a lot of Jimmys in the world who have lost hope because they continually bump up against the realities of life. They don't measure up. They continue to fail. The Jimmy plan we developed with this child may give you some ideas, but every child is different. The solution wasn't the card on the desk. The solution was to get into Jimmy's heart and help him develop a plan for success.

Even kids who resist change can be part of the process. Those kids will likely require a bit more firmness and a heavy dose of relationship, but the heart-based approach will win in the end.

For more ideas about developing internal motivation in children, you might want to look at the new book by Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN called *Motivate Your Child, A Christian Parent's Guide to Raising Kids Who Do What They Need to Do Without Being Told*.

Dr. Scott Turansky and Joanne Miller, RN, BSN are the founders of the National Center for Biblical Parenting. Their two families have enjoyed ministry together and much more over the past 25 years. The two couples take regular vacations together and enjoy ministering together in their church as well. You can learn more about the Turanskys and Miller and their ministry at BiblicalParenting.org.