



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Living with the Strong-Willed Child- Part 2

Guest(s): Joy Solomon, Debra Merritt, Kristen Walker, and Lizz Walker

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello everyone. I'm Dr. James Dobson, and this is Family Talk, a division of the new James Dobson Family Institute. Today, we're going to continue with a classic conversation that I was part of that deals directly with a struggle and many parents are dealing with. Many years ago, Shirley and I, were at a luncheon where we met three incredible mothers. Now we got to talking about their children and many of them were undeniably strong-willed. I was moved by what they shared and I felt they would be a good idea to invite them into the studio to talk about their parenting experience. Joining me back then on that day was Joy Solomon at dedicated mom who was very active in her church's children's department. Next was Debra Merritt, a retired teacher and mother of four. And lastly was Kristen Walker, a high school teacher, and also a mother of four kids.

Kristen's daughter, Lizz, was with her mom at that time, and she was in the recording with us. So you're going to hear from her in the midst of this discussion. So let's pick up where we left off yesterday. It was an exciting and informative discussion. We're going to jump right in with where we were last time.

What do you say to those who claim that children are born as a blank slate? That they're all the same at birth, and then the environment comes along and stamps in different temperaments. You have many children. Let's see, how many do we have? We've got 10 kids represented among the three of you. Every one of them is unique. Every one of them is different, right?

Joy Solomon: Everyone. They are born with a personality. I truly believe that.

Dr. James Dobson: And there is a continuum from one extreme to the other regarding this issue of the will all the way from sweetness and light. I mean, they just loved the please. And that's really part of their nature is to get that sense of satisfaction of pleasing you all the way over to the other side, where the greatest thrill is to precipitate a fight, right?

Debra Merritt: That's right. I believe firmly that a strong-willed child loves conflict. They just love the battle. And I don't love the battle. It was a very difficult experience for me because I'm not strong enough.

Dr. James Dobson: I did a research project many years ago on this subject. And many of the things that we're talking about here were represented in that study. But one of the things that that jumped out at me is where you have a compliant, loving mother who would have drained taking on her parents in this way. And then you've got this kid that just gets the greatest fun out of fighting, as you said. You got tears in your eyes.

Debra Merritt: I do have tears in my eyes. Let me tell you a story that's funny. We did this thing and I don't know whether it came from a Dobson book or whatever, where we would count to three. We would give the children... "This is what we would like you to do. You have to the count of three to do it." This was a situation where I'd taken, Elizabeth and I'd put her in her high chair and she was going to be eating. I was giving her Cheerios and fun things to eat, and I was working, doing a fundraiser for some organization. And I was just trying to keep her busy. Well, at some point during the time she says, "Mother, I want to eat now one, two, three. And me-

Dr. James Dobson: She's counting you down

Debra Merritt: ... right, by two and a half I had her dinner ready for her. And my husband walked in the door and I said, "John, it works." I said, "By two and a half, I had done everything that she wanted me to do." And he said, "Yeah, that's what we need." Is like, was a compliant mother and a strong-willed child. And that's-

Dr. James Dobson: Joy, you saw the tears a minute ago. Do you ever cry over this issue when your daughter was young?

Joy Solomon: I cried a lot when she was young. I cried a lot more during the teenage years. That's more were dark days. But especially as a young child, because I am the second born of a set of identical twins. And my twin sister is the dominant twin our entire life.

So, I tell people that when we were growing up, she would say, "Run." I said, "How fast." She said, "Jump." I said, "How high?" And I assumed that my children would have more of my personality. And people that know me now because I am more outgoing and very gregarious, they say, "Oh, Dana is just like you." And she isn't. I was so shy as a child. And to please my parents was my greatest role in life to make them proud of me and to please them. I remember we went to a party once, Davey and I, were married and it ended up where things that should not have been exposed to me, even at that age, was brought out and I panicked. And we got out and I said, "They could have arrested me and call my parents." And Davey said, "We're married. They're not calling your parents." And I said, "But they would."

So even at that age to please my parents. And then to have this child, that the defiant spirit was her goal in life, but a tremendous heart, like you said. She had such a heart for the underdog and such a love. And what you say to them, they

can turn back on you in a heartbeat. Because we had a phrase in the house that "I refused to negotiate with a four-year-old." I would say that to her constantly. She would say, "Well, if you don't do this..." And I'd go, "I refuse to negotiate with a four year old. This is the final answer." And one day at preschool, there was a young boy that they were mainstreaming who was handicapped. And, Dana, immediately befriended this child more than anyone else in the class.

She was drawn to that child. And this other one was another boy was making fun of this child. And she said, "I'm only going to warn you once. Don't make fun of him again, or I'm going to have to beat you up." Well, he came back and made fun of him again. And Dana said, "This was your last warning. I only give two warnings. Don't make fun of him again." Well, he came back and before she was through with him, she had dragged him up one side of the playground and down the other. She had torn his shirt. She had torn his shorts with him screaming for Dana to let him go. And the teachers finally got a hold of her and said, "Dana, did you not hear him asking you to let him go?" And she said, "I gave him two warnings. I refused to negotiate with a four-year-old" and came right back to me.

- Dr. James Dobson: So, you see the same will that's expressed with the parent is often expressed with peers, which can be an advantage. Because these youngsters are tough enough to do what they want to do. Whether there's peer pressure or not. Lizz, you're listening to all this. Tell me what's going through your mind.
- Lizz Walker: This is actually really fun for me. Just hearing other stories about kids who have had to deal with this. And it's really interesting to hear what parents have to say about kids like me. And I've never thought about what parents have had to go through.
- Dr. James Dobson: This gets really personal, but that's why we're all here. Did you ever see your mom cry in a moment of conflict like that?
- Lizz Walker: Hardly ever. She's very-
- Dr. James Dobson: She's not a crier.
- Lizz Walker: She's very stoic, I think. Is the word... She's very solid. I think she does that for me.
- Dr. James Dobson: Did you ever know you were hurting her or setting her badly?
- Lizz Walker: I think deep down I did. But because she never showed that to me in any way and because she was, "I'm going to win." I was like, "Oh, fine." And so I didn't care.
- Dr. James Dobson: So, let's go at it, right?

Lizz Walker: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. Kristen, you're not a crier.

Kristen Walker: Not a whole lot, not most, any time.

Dr. James Dobson: Can you understand why the two ladies here felt that way?

Kristen Walker: Oh, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Did you feel that way or you just didn't express it this way?

Kristen Walker: Oh, I was going to say I didn't express it in tears necessarily. I probably, we talked about this earlier. We think that even though none of us were strong-willed before we had strong-willed children, we have become strong-willed-

Dr. James Dobson: In order to cope with it.

Kristen Walker: ... in order to cope with that. And I think I've always wanted to please people, I still do. But I was bound and determined that my children were not going to defeat me in anything. And that came really true with, Lizz. And we fought those battles. But I felt like there were days and weeks periods that, that's all I did. My entire days were consumed with disciplining her and trying to get her to follow the rules the way we had laid them out.

Dr. James Dobson: And the other children were not behaving quite that

Kristen Walker: Oh, no. No, not at all. You'd tell my oldest and my youngest not to do something. And they'd look up with you there with their big blue eyes and they'd say, "Oh mommy, I'm sorry." And they'd never do it again. Lizz would say, "Let's go."

Dr. James Dobson: This is something that, that it's in the genetic makeup of the child.

Joy Solomon: I'm not giving, Dana, a great hope.

Kristen Walker: I was going to say, Lizz has the mother's curse. I hope you have a child just like you.

Dr. James Dobson: Wait till you get yours

Kristen Walker: I've taken it further and I said, "I hope all of yours are just like you."

Joy Solomon: I have told Dana that I hope that she never experienced it because that would give me the strong-willed grandchild. So I'm looking at easier grandchildren.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, it is interesting, again, that some parents have four or five them all strong-willed. You guys each had essentially one that was really tough. Right?

Debra Merritt: Well, I think that I have several that are strong-willed. Plus I have one that trained another one to be a strong-willed. When you have twins and one of them is strong-willed, we had a lot of trouble keeping my children when they were little in their cribs. Because Christina did not need to sleep, she was very physically able. She could climb, she could walk. All my kids walked and ran it at 10 months old. And she would help her brother get out of the crib in the middle of the night. And this is where our battles took place. They were running around.

Dr. James Dobson: Explain how she allowed her brother to get out of the-

Debra Merritt: She was strong enough to jump out of bed. And then she would collect whatever was in the room and put it in his crib. So... he would step up on stuffed animals or whatever was to jump out of bed. And then the two of them would be running loose all over the house. I mean, literally. This sounds ridiculous, but we would find them in the kitchen, on the sink, playing with knives, opening the refrigerator, throwing things around. I got to the point where the only way I could survive and know that they could survive because literally obedience was not my goal when they were two.

Dr. James Dobson: Just keeping them alive

Debra Merritt: Survive. Keeping him alive was all I could do. I slept outside their door with a pillow and a blanket because they would have to cross over me before they would leave the room. And that's how-

Dr. James Dobson: It's only way you could protect them.

Debra Merritt: ... the only way I could protect them. And I prayed for them. Joy, I prayed, we laid hands on them and we said, "Oh Lord, spanking, didn't work." I slept outside their door and prayed for them so they didn't kill themselves when they were little. And that sounds extreme.

Dr. James Dobson: Debra, have you found yourself in moments like that with your face in your hands saying, "I am a total failure as a mom?"

Debra Merritt: I did because I wish I could say that I was like these ladies and just toe the line. I had four children, I had twins and I was tired.

Dr. James Dobson: You just couldn't fight all the time.

Debra Merritt: And I couldn't fight it. And what I did when they were a little bit older and they... The Lord is good. I trust the power of prayer, I trust salvation. When my kids became saved and they were baptized by their own choice, they all changed.

They all became new people in Christ and their personalities changed. And that happened at about 14 or 15 for each one of them. And truly the Lord has done an incredible work that I can't take any responsibility for. I wish I had been strict or I wish I'd been firmer, but I did what I could do. And the Lord put me with four children, three of whom were very difficult at times.

Dr. James Dobson: See, Debra, every one of us is inadequate as a parent. We all have to depend on the Lord. And it hit me as a Ph.D. in child development when my daughter was three, that she would eventually make her own choices in life. And I could not absolutely guarantee where she was going. Because I saw that there was something inside that I would not eventually, at least, would not control. And we come to the point where even in our greatest strength, we have to say, "Lord, you got to help me here." That's what parenting is all about. Joy, did you depend on the Lord that way?

Joy Solomon: Oh, boy, did I ever. I remember there were days when our phrase, when Davey got home at the end of the day, he wouldn't say, "How was your day?" He would say, "How many spankings did she get today?" And he wouldn't even ask about our son because he knew-

Dr. James Dobson: So, it was a battle all day long.

Joy Solomon: All day long. From the time she woke up until the time she went to bed. And there are times that you would sit and she would be such an angel. She would be so caring and loving and you go, "Okay, we're making progress. We're making progress." And then 30 seconds later, one thing would trigger that strong-will and she would be often running. And there were times, especially for stay at home moms, you feel like you are such a failure. You feel like this is a career I chose. It's like if I had started a small business and just watch... invested all my money and watched it go under. Here, I am looking at this child that God has entrusted to me and I can't even control her.

Dr. James Dobson: Kristen, those thoughts...

Kristen Walker: That was our biggest thing. We're finding consequences, big enough to deter her will. And I mean, we had to go to the elders of our church at one point because-

Dr. James Dobson: This now, this is an embarrassing moment.

Kristen Walker: ... it's about time she gets back. She would steal. She would take whatever she wanted. And we'd say, "Lizz, why are you taking that?" And she'd say, "Because I want it." And which was amazing to me that a four or a five year old could articulate the bottom line. I mean, because that was the bottom line. "I wanted it. I took it." She'd steal money from the church or from the offering plate to buy a Coke from the Coke machine. She stole some of the decorations out of the bathroom, just a little cinnamon stick. But she wanted it, therefore she took it.

And it got to the point where we told her, this is bad enough, we've spanked all we could do. We had to take her back in to scripture.

And my husband sat down with her and said, "This is what scripture says. You've got to obey the authorities. And if you don't, we've got to go to a higher authority." And he went to the elders of our church and asked a couple of them that had children if they would be willing to sit down with, Lizz. And at that time she was probably in kindergarten, maybe first grade. And these two godly men sat down with her and made her accountable, made her memorize scripture. But it got to the point where she needed to know that there were higher... We couldn't do it. And so we went with her to the elders.

Dr. James Dobson: Lizz that had an impact on you, didn't it?

Lizz Walker: Extremely, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: What do you remember about that? Just being embarrassed?

Lizz Walker: I remember just being thoroughly embarrassed and having to be responsible for what I did to someone else and having to fess up to that responsibility. And I remember... in probably second grade, I would take things from my teachers. I would get into their desk, if they had food in there, I would take their food. And I'd steal my kindergarten teachers earrings or something. And eventually my parents I was thinking, who cares, I can get by parents. I'll be disciplined, who cares? And the discipline didn't bother me. It was when they said, "Okay, you have to go to your teacher, you have to go to the elders and you have to apologize for doing that." And that's when I was like, "Oh, no." And it was embarrassing and humbling. And I realized what I had done.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah, discipline was not something that deterred you in any way.

Lizz Walker: It didn't faze me. Not a bit.

Dr. James Dobson: You just figured out a way to get around it.

Lizz Walker: Uh-huh (affirmative). Well, it was more like, especially in middle school it was like, "Well, I'll get disciplined so that I can try to break that discipline."

Dr. James Dobson: It was a challenge for you.

Lizz Walker: Yeah. If I got grounded from the phone, I try to get on the phone. If I got a computer, I try to get on computer. So it was just something else to be defined about.

Dr. James Dobson: You have to figure out where the kid is. You got to get behind the eyes of the child. How many times have you heard me say that? Get behind the eyes of the child, see it the way the child sees it, and then you know how to respond. Until

you do that, you don't understand that. Lizz, my mother knew that I was messing around at school. I was just... discipline problem at school when I was in the ninth grade. And people have heard this story before. But my mother figured out how to get to me. And she told me you'd behave any way you want to at school. And I'm not going to do anything about it unless they call me. But if they ever call me, I'm going to school with you, and I'm sitting beside you, and you'll be standing in the hall with your friends, I'm going to be right there, and you will not be able to shake me for a whole day. Man, that shaped me up in a big hurry. Because how'd you go about it.

Debra Merritt: I went to school, that's what I did. I've been a teacher for 10 years. I went to school with my children. And I think part of the reason I did is so that I could watch them and I could be part of their lives in a huge way. My child got even with me for doing that. This is kind of an interesting story because I can't believe that they would do this kind of thing.

But, Christina, I was so guilty, felt so guilty about going to school and going back to work because I was a real firm believer in the at home mom. But I thought really I'm at school with them all day long. It's kind of like having mom at home all the time. She told all of the parents that were very much at home mothers because her mother worked, she wasn't a good mom and she didn't have the time to make her lunches for her. So somehow she manipulated getting a hot lunch every day out of every nice woman in the entire school. And I had everybody watching me walk up and down the hall, like, what right do you have to be here? And I thought, wait a minute. And finally the teacher called me in and said, "We have a little problem. Christina, never has lunch. And so everybody feels sorry for it-

Dr. James Dobson: Brother.

Debra Merritt: ... and they give her these lunches." I looked at her and I looked at the teacher and I said, "I will handle this." And I went to this child and I said, "Honey, I pack six lunches every night at 10:30." I said, "Where is your lunch?" She says, "Mommy." She says, "I learned that if I told them I didn't have a lunch, somebody would provide me with a really nice hot lunch and I didn't have to eat peanut butter and jelly anymore." She got, even with me for going to school.

Dr. James Dobson: That matter of vulnerability on the part of the parent becomes a very powerful weapon in the hands of the child. It's like, it's like a military situation. You probe the line for weaknesses. And if the parent recoils in pain, when the child says, "I hate you." Or go tells the neighbors, "You're abusing them." Or who knows what, Debra, like what you experienced, then they've won the ultimate victory. It is just the way it is in some situations. And you just have to put an arm around those parents. If you know somebody going through this, don't you dare accuse them of being a bad parent. Pray for them and offer some advice and maybe buy a book for them. All right, folks, at least acknowledge those of you in the listening audience. At least acknowledge that in this atmosphere that we live in today, where there are abused children out there, the most terrifying thing that

can be said about a good parent is that they have abused their children. And some kids are smart enough to figure that out and then manipulate that.

Kristen Walker: And to discipline Lizz, a couple of times, the military is very careful about that. And as every parent knows the commissary or the grocery store is the place for a child to check your limits. And I had to take her out of the commissary to discipline her once, to spank her. And boy, the looks I got were just like accusing me. And I knew if I spanked her there, I would have been accused. But so yeah, you have to be very careful.

Dr. James Dobson: And the world's changed even since then. There's some people that feel any physical punishment is child abuse. It's not, but that's the way the culture is going.

Joy Solomon: Our, Dana, used to... If she was in trouble in the car and she knew what was ahead of her, she would put both hands on the window and she would scream at people as they drove by. Especially at red lights, "Save me."

Dr. James Dobson: You are kidding.

Joy Solomon: No. No, we're not kidding about it. Thinking if a police pulls up there, they're pulling me over, I'm going to have to show them that this really is my child, save me.

Roger Marsh: Well we certainly ended with some humor on today's edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. But despite the funny stories that these mothers have been sharing, there are some moments of real anguish and incredible frustration when raising a strong-willed child. Remember though that some kids are just truly wired to be more defiant and challenging of your authority. Don't get discouraged. There is hope. And these challenging days with your strong-willed child will get better. As Dr. Dobson said in his famous teaching film on the subject years ago, "Hang in there. If nothing else, this won't last forever. This too shall pass."

Now, if you're looking for a resource to help you through these days with your strong-willed kid, Dr. Dobson's book, *The New Strong-willed Child* is a great benefit. To request your copy, visit our broadcast page at drjamesdobson.org/broadcast. While you're there, take some time to look around at the other great parenting resources we have available searching for parenting in our search bar is a great way to start again. Again, the web address is drjamesdobson.org. Or you can always call us at (877)-732-6825. Again, our number is (877)-732-6825.

Now, before signing off for the day, I'd like to remind you that every month, Dr. Dobson sits down to pen a timely newsletter specifically for you and your family. In these newsletters, he addresses the most important topics in our culture in order to help you navigate today's ever confusing and ever changing world.

Make your request to receive Dr. Dobson's newsletter free every month when you call us at (877)-732-6825. That's (877)-732-6825.

Well, today you heard part two of a three-part broadcast dedicated to the topic of "Living with the Strong-willed Child." Be sure to join us again tomorrow for the final installment of this important series right here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk. From all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, I'm Roger Marsh. Thanks so much for making us a part of your day.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hi everyone, Dr. Tim Clinton here. When you think about your family and where they'll be when you're no longer living, are you worried? Are you confident? You're hopeful. What kind of a legacy are you leaving for your children and their children right now. Here at Family Talk, we're committed to helping you understand the legacy that you're leaving your family. Join us today at drjamesdobson.org. You're going to find helpful insights, tips, and advice from Dr. Dobson himself. And remember your legacy matters.

Dr. James Dobson: Have you noticed that children will occasionally disobey their parents for the express purpose of testing just how much they can get away with? This game called challenge the chief can be played with surprising skill, even by very young children.

Roger Marsh: For Family Talk, here's Dr. James Dobson.

Dr. James Dobson: One Father told me recently of taking his three-year-old daughter to a basketball game. Naturally, the child was interested in everything in the gymnasium except the game. So the father permitted her to roam free. But he did walk her down to the stripe, painted on the gym floor. And he told her not to go past that line. No sooner had he returned to his seat. When she scurried down the aisle and scraped toward the forbidden territory. She stopped at the border, then flashed a grin over her shoulder at her father, and she deliberately placed one foot over the line. It was as if she were saying, "What you're going to do about it?"

Fortunately, every parent the world over has been asked that same question at one time or another. Now, when a parent ignores this kind of challenge, something changes in the parent child relationship. For a particularly strong-willed boy or girl that early test of parental leadership can grow into a full blown case of rebellion during the troubled days of adolescents. The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents, but insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them.

Roger Marsh: Hear more at drjamesdobson.org.