



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Living with the Strong-Willed Child- Part 1

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

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Dr. James Dobson: Well, hello everyone. I'm James Dobson and you're listening to Family Talk, a listener supported ministry. In fact, thank you so much for being part of that support for James Dobson Family Institute.

Roger Marsh: Hello, and welcome to Family Talk, the listener supported broadcast division of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh, and I'd like to begin today's program by thanking you for your support. Without your prayers and your financial support, the JDFI wouldn't be able to produce valuable content that reaches millions of families every day. So please, on behalf of everyone here at James Dobson Family Institute, please accept our thanks.

Now on today's broadcast, we are sharing the first part of an important classic discussion on the topic of raising the strong-willed child. Doctor?

Dr. James Dobson: I have written some 71 books there, there are 35 of them that we talk about regularly, and that most of them are still in print. We're going to talk about the second bestselling book that I have written. And it's called *The Strong-Willed Child*. When I wrote that book, frankly, it was in contradiction to a lot of what I had been taught in graduate school about the nature of children. In a strange kind of way, in those days, child developmentalists and pediatricians and professors and others tried to tell us that children are born, they come into the world as a blank slate, that they have no inborn temperaments and personality. But the environment comes along and stamps into those little youngsters their uniqueness that becomes so well-known to all of us. That is wrong. I knew it very quickly. I think I knew it even in graduate school, because little children are incredibly complex at the moment of birth.

They come into the world with this array personalities and temperaments and things that make them unique from every other individual that has ever lived on the face of the earth. They look different. We're all unique. We're all different. How foolish of us to think otherwise. If every snowflake that falls in the wintertime is different from every other snowflake, and if you look at them under a microscope, you will see that they're unique. And if every grain of sand at the beach is unique, how crazy to think that God rubber stamps human beings, the most complex creatures on Earth. Our brains are designed for a particular purpose.

My father had four brothers, so there were five boys in that family. And if you knew them, you would know that there was almost no communality between them, except for the twins. The first two were named Robert and Lee and they were tremendous athletes. One went on to be a head football coach at one of the largest high schools in Shreveport, Louisiana. And the other one could have played professional football, if there had been in the NFL at that time. The third child to come along was a mama's boy. And he was kind of a sissy. He didn't play football, he didn't play baseball. He played the piano. He was very sensitive. He was totally different than his two older brothers. The fourth one to come along was a businessman, great money sense, and they say kept part of every dollar he ever made. My dad to come along had no business sense whatsoever. He was not a football player. He was not a piano player. My dad was an artist, and all he cared about was sitting out in a field looking at a tree, and he could sit there all day.

It was amazing how those five children were different. Now, when people meet me on a street, one of the questions they often ask is that, I have two children, or have three or four or five children, and every one of them is different. I don't know why they're so different, because I raised them the same. The reason is because they were born different.

So, we're going to talk about the strong-willed child today, because in a few minutes, you're going to hear the first part of my conversation. It's actually a three-part or three-day conversation with three mothers of strong-willed children. And they're going to share their stories and their experiences. Some of them are funny, but also they're going to talk about the difficulties of raising a really tough child. Before we listen to my conversation. I want to tell you about these three ladies.

The first is Debra Merritt, who's a retired teacher and mother of four. The second is Kristen Walker, a high school teacher and mom to four kids, as well. And as she has brought her daughter along with her, and her name is Lizz. And you're going to hear her chime in, in a moment. And then the third is Joy Solomon, who was the inspiration behind this meaningful conversation. I love talking to these ladies, because they're very candid and very open about what parenthood has been like for them and what we can learn from their strong-willed children. So let's listen now, as I explain what brought these wonderful women together.

I was in Alabama several months ago, with Shirley, and we were having lunch kind of on an outdoor porch, as I recall, and happened to be sitting across from Joy and Davey, and didn't know them, began to get acquainted. How did that conversation start Joy? I think you-

Joy Solomon:

Well, I think it started when we first met. It was so funny when you said, "Hi, I'm Jim." Like, we wouldn't recognize that voice immediately. It was overwhelming. And I said, "Well, I'm Joy, but I'm surprised you don't remember me, because you lived with us for a while." And you said, "I did?" And I said, "Yes, for about

three years when we were really working with that strong-willed child." And you said, "Oh, you have one of those?" And I said, "Yes." And you asked how old he was. And I said, "Well, it's a she, and she is now 19 and doing very well, but..."

Dr. James Dobson: You've had your struggles.

Joy Solomon: Very dark days.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, Joy, the reason that I wanted you to be here today, we've kind of built a program around what you said to me that day, is that you're kind of a quintessential mother of a strong-willed child. You experienced those frustrations that I was trying to talk about and describe a few minutes ago.

Joy Solomon: All of them.

Dr. James Dobson: And the guilt and the self-condemnation and the self-doubt, all of that was there for you from very, very early, wasn't it?

Joy Solomon: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: How soon after your daughter was born did you know that she was going to take you on?

Joy Solomon: I think probably when you bring them home from the hospital, there's the clue that comes on. Our son was only nine months old when I was ready to have another baby, because I was an exceptional mom. He slept eight hours a night at 12 weeks old. He woke up in his bed and played until you went to get him. Well, I knew that was fully attributable to me as a mother.

Dr. James Dobson: Sure, you got the credit for that, right?

Joy Solomon: And I said, "Oh, I'm ready for another one." And I think, unwittingly, we sort of dare God, because number one, I was never going to have a picky eater. And number two, I would not tolerate a thumb sucker. Well, Jason, we have to buy stock in Oscar Meyer, because he lived off of hotdogs and bologna. He was the pickiest eater. And then I would not have had a thumb sucker, and Dana would have given up her parents before she gave up her thumb. And I was a wonderful mom, so all of my kids were going to be great.

Dr. James Dobson: See, and I think it was in *Parenting isn't for Cowards* that I talked about the fact that nature kind of does a number on parents, that give you an easy kid first, and you congratulate yourself on what a great parent you are, and bam, here comes this little tiger.

Joy Solomon: The little Dana.

Dr. James Dobson: As I said, smoking a cigar.

Joy Solomon: I think she slept through the night at maybe 15 months old. And at 18 months old, you could tell her no, and she would fall on the floor and throw her fit and roll around. And we would sit and watch her for a while, because we weren't going to give in. We were going to be strong. And she would stand up and she would have that beautiful angelic face. And she would say, "I'm sorry." And she would come over and lay her head in my lap, and then she would bite me. And that was the first clue, because it was a manipulation. She made sure that you weren't worried about what she was going to do.

Dr. James Dobson: And she was very, very tough.

Joy Solomon: Very tough.

Dr. James Dobson: She knows that you're here today.

Joy Solomon: Yes, she does.

Dr. James Dobson: And she has given permission for you to tell the story.

Joy Solomon: She did, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Because it does have a happy ending. And in fact, that's one of the things we want to say to parents who are out there. Just don't panic it, hang in there, but you still have to know how to cope with it.

Joy Solomon: The amount of intelligence and the strong will, and when you take a keen intelligence and a strong will, and especially for us at age 16, when the spirit turns defiant, you're in a world of hurt.

Dr. James Dobson: Now, Joy, I'm anxious to get to the others of you, but I really want you to help folks understand this who have never seen a strong-willed child. I know some families with six or seven or eight kids and not a one of them has this temperament. And you need to help people understand just what it's like. This is not just disobeying occasionally. I mean, every child does this. This is not even just toddler tantrums. This is a war of wills from the very early moments of life.

Joy Solomon: Yes. I remember a key time for us was, she was five years old, and she was a physically strong child. And there was an episode where she had been out throwing rocks at cars. And I called her in and I said, "Dana, why were you throwing rocks at cars?" And she said, "Well, I did warn them. As they went down the street, I told them if they came back by, and they didn't belong on my street, that I'd have to throw a rock at their car."

Dr. James Dobson: That says a whole lot.

Joy Solomon: "So I only threw rocks at cars that didn't belong on our street." And I said, "We live on a cul-de-sac. Where were they going?" And she had that look that she

would give you when you just really weren't understanding what she was saying. And she said, "That's not my fault." So it was understandable to her. We were on a cul-de-sac. So it wasn't her fault that someone had built the street that way. I took her in to spank her and she said, "You're not going to spank me. I'm going to wait until my daddy gets home." Well, you've met Davey. He is a large man. Her concept for that was, the longer you put off the spanking, the longer time she had to work up her defense, why she should be right in what she was doing and did not deserve a spanking. And I said, "No, I'm going to spank you now." And she said, "No, you're not. You will not spank me." And I said, "Yes, I will."

And that day, I think, was a terrifying day, because I physically could not control her. She threw every ounce of strength and strong will into fighting me. And it was a battle that probably lasted an hour-and-a-half. And this child was five years old.

Dr. James Dobson: How did it end?

Joy Solomon: It ended with me putting her out in the garage. And she was walking around screaming. And she rang the doorbell. And she said, "I'll take my spanking now." Because if ever you let them win the smallest battles, it's lost. And I spanked her. And a good friend of ours, a pastor in Columbus, I went to see him and I said, "I'm at my wit's end. I don't physically know how to control this child." And he said, "Every night, when you put her to bed, I want you and Davey to go in and I want you to lay hands on her while she's asleep. And what you're going to pray is for the Holy Spirit to conquer the strong will while not destroying her spirit, because that's what makes her who Dana is."

And we did that. Every night we would go in and we would pray over her and lay hands on her. And it was probably about six months later, she got up one morning and she said, "You know, I'm bad sometimes." And I said, "I know." And she said, "I don't mean the things I say, I'm not going to do that anymore." And probably for the next five years, 10 years, somewhere around in that range, while it wasn't gone, she was able to control it. And then she hit adolescence.

Dr. James Dobson: You were not a pushover, were you, Joy?

Joy Solomon: No.

Dr. James Dobson: I mean, you were determined to discipline this kid. This is not a matter of a mom who's out of control and is letting a kid get away with murder.

Joy Solomon: We were to the point where I remember one night we were at a restaurant and I innocently said, "Does anyone need to go to the bathroom?" And they both started screaming at the top of their lungs, because going to the bathroom meant a spanking, because I never spanked them... And I said, "No, I just meant it to go to the bathroom. I didn't mean you've been bad." Dana saw every

bathroom in Columbus, Georgia. We would go in for a spanking, go in for a spanking, because she was just that defiant, strong-willed spirit.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. I have one more story I want you to tell, and then we'll get to the others. Your son decided to run away from home.

Joy Solomon: He did.

Dr. James Dobson: All right. This is what we heard at the luncheon that we had in Alabama.

Joy Solomon: And I would do, we called it lovingly, the Dr. Dobson spiel, where I would say, "Oh, mother loves you so much, and you have to be my big boy." And you go through that, and you go through that. Every time, he would say, "I'm going to run away from home." Well, one night, it just struck me, "Okay, this is it." So he was in his little pajamas and he said, "If you make me go to bed, I'm going to run away from home." So I said, "Well, we'll see you later, buddy. Have a nice trip." So he rang the doorbell and he said, "I didn't mean tonight." And I said, "Well, I do. I'm really tired of this. It's time for you to go, but let me pack you a bag. You'll need pajamas and things." And he said, "Well, I might need to think about this." And I said, "Well, you've got about three minutes while I go pack your bag." I said, "It's important to me that you stay here and be our son, but this is your decision. Either you run away, or I never hear this again. You decide to live here, and I don't hear that again."

So, I went and I packed, got the suitcase. I don't think I put anything in it. And I went back and I opened the door and he said, "Well, I've been thinking about it. And I guess I'm going to stay." And I said, "But never say that to me again. Do you understand?" He said, "Yes, ma'am." And from then on, he would say, "If you make me do that, I... I'm not going to be your best friend." And I'd say, "Well, that's sad."

But what works for one has to work for the other because I was a stay-at-home mom, and Dana was going through her, "I'm going to run away from home, I'm going to run away from home." So one night, I had had it, and I said, "Well, I'll see you later." And it's funny, the pictures that stay in your mind. She had on a Strawberry Shortcake robe and strawberry Shortcake slippers, and her little blonde hair. And I went and sat down, and Davey looked at me and he said, "Well, she's been out there about five minutes. Do you think maybe she should have rang the doorbell?" And I said, "No, she's got that defiant spirit. We're going to give her about 10 minutes." So I went to the front door. There was nobody there. And only by the grace of God, did we live on that cul-de-sac, because there was a street lamp. And she was down at the street lamp with her thumb out. She was hitching a ride.

Dr. James Dobson: How old was she now?

Joy Solomon: She was probably six, at this point.

Dr. James Dobson: And she's going to catch a ride.

Joy Solomon She was catching a ride, had no fear whatsoever.

Dr. James Dobson: In her robe?

Joy Solomon: In the robe, the slippers, needed nothing else. "You told me I could run away." And I thought, "This isn't what I'm supposed to be dealing with."

Dr. James Dobson: You see why I wanted Joy here? Kristen, tell us your story.

Kristen Walker: Well, in hindsight, I think we knew shortly after birth. At 10 days old, she went into the hospital with spinal meningitis.

Dr. James Dobson: You're speaking of Lizz?

Kristen Walker: Liz.

Dr. James Dobson: Okay.

Kristen Walker: And as they were trying to get a spinal tap fluid, instead of compliantly going into a fetal position as they held her down, she would arch her back, at 10 days old, and ended up going through 10 or 12 spinal taps before they could get untainted spinal fluid to culture to see if she really had spinal meningitis. And in fact, it was so bad they ended up going through her brain, to get to the base of her spine to do that.

And then at 18 months we were visiting some friends for dinner, and my two older kids were there, and they had cut glass candy dishes at each end of their couch. They didn't have any children yet, they could do that. And I told my two oldest children, "These are glass, they'll break. Don't touch them. Don't play rough around here." I didn't even mention them to Lizz. I thought, "I'll deal with that when the time comes." And when she finally saw them after dinner, we went through that, "No, you're not going to touch that. No, we're not going to touch that." And one finger and everything else. And my friend, after the battle was over, she said, "Do you realize you spanked her hand nine times to get her to understand?"

Dr. James Dobson: She understood.

Kristen Walker: She understood for that moment.

Dr. James Dobson: No question about the fact that you were saying, "No, don't do this."

Kristen Walker: She understood.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah. But she was simply saying, "I think I can outlast you."

Kristen Walker: Oh, yes.

Dr. James Dobson: Yeah.

Kristen Walker: In my mind, probably the epitome war that we fought, she was probably five, and I had been homeschooling the kids. My husband's Air Force, and so we were living in Alabama at the time, and we were homeschooling the kids. And she decided she wasn't getting enough attention one day. And so I pulled her up on my lap, and while she was sitting on my lap and I was still trying to teach, she started kicking me with one of her legs. Well, I put her leg between my legs, so she couldn't kick me anymore. Well, that didn't work. So she started kicking me with the other one. So I put both legs between her. Then she started pinching or scratching. We ended up on the floor. She was spreadeagled on the floor. I was holding her down so that she could not hurt me or try to do damage to me. And she's screaming, "Let go of me, let go of me." And I'm saying, "We're here until you calm down." And she quit crying, and I'd start to pray, and she'd immediately start screaming again, "Don't you pray for me." So we'd start again. And this was a good 45-minute battle.

Dr. James Dobson: Lizz, do you remember that?

Lizz Walker: I remember several times where I would just argue, and seriously, I would end up on the floor with mother on top of me saying, "Who's going to win? Who's going to win?" She would just go on, go on and go on for, I mean, hours even, sometimes.

Dr. James Dobson: Do you remember how you felt during those battles?

Lizz Walker: Determined to win.

Dr. James Dobson: You're just going to win it.

Lizz Walker: "I'm stronger than mom." You know, it was just the whole idea of being rebellious and doing what I wanted to do.

Dr. James Dobson: Debra, let's hear just a little bit, we've only got about three- or four-minutes left, and we'll start with you next time. Tell us about your strong-willed child.

Debra Merritt: Well, I kind of have two strong-willed children. I thought that I had one, my first daughter, when she was born, she had a little bit of what Lizz went through. We did the, "You can't do this." And then I would have to go through a little bit of the sitting on her and making sure she obeyed. And I had one child at the time. For two-and-a-half years I had one child. She was my focus, and I could do all the things right. I could say, "No, we're going to do it this way." She would rip wallpaper off the wall. She would do all these things that I thought were just awful.

Well, it turned out she was sick. She was asthmatic and she didn't feel well. When she didn't feel well, she was cranky. So it made it a totally different child out of her when we took her to the doctor and found out that there was a good reason why she was just frustrated and she was upset. So truly, I don't believe that she was a strong-willed child. Two children later, I had another child that definitely was a strong-willed child.

Dr. James Dobson: She was bona fide.

Debra Merritt: She was a strong-willed child before she was born. She was part of a twin set. She has a twin brother. And my only prayer had been, you were talking about how God is funny sometimes, my only prayer had been, "If I'm going to have a boy-girl twin set," which I kind of felt that I would have, "I want the boy to be the football player and the girl to be the nice, sweet little cheerleader." And in reality, it's my daughter that's being recruited by the football team at this point. And my son is a wonderful child and he writes tender poetry. He'll be the best pediatrician in the whole world. So I had kind of a flip-flop there, too.

Dr. James Dobson: When you say you knew it before birth, I think in the film series, I said, "Long before birth, the kid's been scratching initials on the walls." Is that the kind of thing?

Debra Merritt: The night before they were born, I was scheduled for C-sections. I don't dilate. So I had scheduled C-sections for all of my deliveries. And I was playing games with some friends next door, and I had this eruption like a volcano or an earthquake in my stomach. And I know that it's probably not possible, but I swear she switched places with him. Like he was supposed to be the lower child to come out first. And she just went...I had this horrible thing. I woke up in the morning thinking that my water had broken. In reality, I was kind of lying in a pool of blood. That child was going to come out of that cervix, whether it dilated or not. And I was raced to the hospital and I went into emergency surgery at that point. But she was going to come out, no matter what she had to face. So talk about being born smoking a cigar, yelling orders at the nursing staff, complaining about the temperature, she was there.

Dr. James Dobson: And early on then.

Debra Merritt: Oh yes. Oh yes.

Dr. James Dobson: In the first year even?

Debra Merritt: I would say, no, from the day we brought her home. Her dad has a personality very similar to her. He's kind of known as the Attila the Hun at work. And so she favored her dad. And I had twins. I had two children. I had a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and then I had these two babies. No grandparents lived close by. They would come and visit and help us. But I was busy. I was a very busy young mother.

And yes, she would scream and scream and scream. And I thought, "Well, she's sick. She has problems. She's got colic," or whatever. Dad would walk in the room. Talk about a baby flirting and cooing, you know, that sweet little thing. That's all she wanted, was Dad. So I thought, "You can raise this child. I'll raise the other three, because she's stronger willed than I am by a long shot."

Dr. James Dobson: How difficult was that for you emotionally?

Debra Merritt: It was very difficult because I was a mother at heart. I'd always wanted to be a mom. I had good relationships. As I said, I'd worked through all those difficulties with my first child. My second child, her name means gracious gift of God. She's precious. She does what she can to help me to serve. She's just a wonderful child. And then I get this child that's... Like my relatives, my in-laws, everybody called her the kid-and-a-half. It's like, "Well, there's Debbie and the twins, but it's like three-and-a-half kids." It's like, "This child is worth at least one-and-a-half children."

Roger Marsh: You're listening to Family Talk, and that was the first installment of a three-part series featuring Dr. Dobson and three moms of strong-willed children, as well as one of those strong-willed children, now a mature young adult. Of course, these moms can now look back and laugh about some of the challenging parenting moments now, but there was nothing funny about them when they were actually happening. In fact, raising and disciplining a strong-willed child is one of the most difficult tasks a parent can face. But there is hope and there is help. Many strong-willed children turn out to be good tempered, amiable adults, and they often make great leaders and parents themselves.

Here at the JDFI, we have many resources for parents who are raising strong-willed children. You can find them by going to our website at drjamesdobson.org and searching for strong-willed child in the search bar. It's a good place to start to find biblical tips, encouragement, and hope for your parenting journey. Again, our web address is drjamesdobson.org. And remember, you can always give us a call. We are here 24/7 to help you find resources, answer your questions about Family Talk and the JDFI, or just pray with you. Our toll-free number is (877)-732-6825. That's (877)-732-6825.

Well, we've only just scratched the surface on the topic of *Living with the Strong-Willed Child*. Join us again tomorrow for part two of this three-part broadcast right here on Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

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