

Where does Willpower come from?

By David L. Smoot, Ph.D.

Many parents ask themselves, “Why does my child have so much willpower?” Others think, “How can my child gain more willpower?” Willpower is a mixed blessing in many ways. Some children just seem to start out life being more spunky than their tamer counterparts.

Children with intense willpower

Consider these examples: *Jane, age 5, is always the first one to try a new activity, she sings (a little off-key) at the top of her lungs, and she’s not timid about standing up for her rights when a peer treats her unfairly. This same little girl often defies her parents while scowling and stamping her foot, occasionally bosses other children around, and insists on being in the spotlight.*

Jason, age 10, can persist for long periods of time in order to get his latest project – from LEGO’s to a cardboard-and-glue structure to a new fort – looking just right. Unfortunately, his persistence can also be revealed when he will not let go of an idea. “No, Jason, for the tenth time, we can’t go to the pool/library/putt-putt today,” his parents sigh in exasperation.

Virtually all children have an innate drive to exert some control over their environment. In and of itself, this drive is healthy and normal. Some children by virtue of their temperament – the personality they are born with – experience the drive for control more intensely than do other children. Again, this can be fine if the strong-willed child learns to use positive measures to reach the goal of control. On the other hand, negative approaches to the goal of control give rise to rebellion, temper tantrums, bossiness, and even bullying.

So what can a parent do for the child with loads of willpower? One simple strategy is to offer your child choices. Appropriate choices will vary across different age groups. Toddlers may make choices between two or three alternatives as in, “Do you want to wear the green shorts or the blue shorts?” Young school-aged children may make choices about which household responsibilities they’ll assume. Older children may choose social activities, who they want to invite over, or what restaurant the family will visit. Teens and parents should definitely share some decision-making and negotiation responsibility. Nearly all adolescents will rebel at some point if they are not given some input into important decisions in their lives. Of course, family negotiation and decision-making requires that parents, as chief authorities of the family, can live with the proposed alternatives!

Children with a shortage of willpower

At the other end of the continuum are children who too easily give up, seem discouraged, or withdraw from challenges. Nothing is as disheartening for a parent as to see your child timidly sell himself short and avoid even a small hurdle in life. Children often feel discouraged when their beliefs about themselves and their abilities are negative. “I can’t do it” “It’s too hard” “Will you help me?” are among the frequent laments of the discouraged child. Certainly some of these children are temperamentally less persistent

than their strong-willed brothers and sisters. As parents, we have to also consider whether we might inadvertently be supplying our youngster with some of these negative self-statements.

For example, children who hear their parents warn, “Be careful; you know you’re going to drop that!” may store away the message: “I guess I’m pretty clumsy.” When parents chide their children saying, “Don’t be such a baby, there’s nothing scary about the dark!” they may give the message to the child that he or she is immature, incapable, or that his or her feelings are silly. The table below is adapted from the work of Michael Popkin, Ph.D. and illustrates how we as parents may be discouraging our children – and how we can turn our influence into an encouraging one.

How to Discourage	How to Encourage
<p>Have negative expectations</p> <p><i>Don't! You'll spill it!</i></p> <p><i>I guess you're not the type who does well in school</i></p>	<p>Show confidence</p> <p><i>You've really been careful. Next time you can use my hammer.</i></p> <p><i>I'd like to hear your opinion about how we could solve this problem.</i></p> <p><i>Keep trying; you can do it!</i></p> <p><i>Look at the map and find the right road.</i></p>
<p>Focus on mistakes</p> <p><i>How could you miss that one?</i></p> <p><i>This work doesn't look very good.</i></p> <p><i>How many times do I have to tell you to pick up your things?</i></p>	<p>Build on strengths</p> <p><i>You write really well using the computer.</i></p> <p><i>I can really see how hard you've worked!</i></p> <p><i>That's step one; try hard on the next one!</i></p>
<p>Expect perfection</p> <p><i>Maybe next time you'll get all A's.</i></p> <p><i>How could you misspell this one when got all the others right?</i></p>	<p>Value the child</p> <p><i>You played hard and I'm proud of you.</i></p>

<p><i>This is good but you could do better.</i></p>	<p><i>You made a mistake but I still love you.</i></p> <p><i>You're one of a kind and I love you!</i></p>
<p>Give too much protection</p> <p><i>I'll call his mom and tell him to leave you alone.</i></p> <p><i>No, you can't go by yourself; I'll go with you.</i></p>	<p>Stimulate independence</p> <p><i>Let me show you how to make your own breakfast.</i></p> <p><i>Let's make the cake together.</i></p>

From M. Popkin (1995) *Active Parenting*

Dr. Popkin cited the work of psychologists such as Rudolph Dreikurs and Alfred Adler who said that courage is the most essential quality a person can have because with courage other positive attributes can be developed. Willpower and courage are vital to our children's healthy development, yet it is often negatively channeled willpower or the lack of willpower in a child that causes concern and conflict in a family. Whether your child's level of willpower comes from temperament, from influences of parenting, or from his or her self esteem, it is important and worthwhile to do everything you can to instill confidence in your child's ability to make choices and show courage.