

HOW TO NURTURE . . .

A Strong-willed Child

You respect your preschooler's will of steel; on the other hand, *you've* got to call the shots—at least some of the time. We asked an author, a teacher, and the father of a resolute daughter, “How do you guide this willful child without squashing her spirit?”

Mary Sheedy Kurcinka,
author of *Raising Your Spirited Child*, St. Paul, MN:

“You need to discover and appreciate who’s come to live with you. It’s important to realize that your child is not trying to be difficult—this is their temperament, how they react to the world. Parents should understand that these kids have traits we value in adults; they are just ‘more.’ More high energy, passionate, persistent. Parents can help their child manage this intensity by teaching them the skills to understand their triggers, know what soothes them, and help them build the vocabulary to express emotions. Then, parents can show their child how to channel this intensity into a positive outlet.”

David Gravina, stay-at-home dad of Maia, 3, and Lucas, 1, Northampton, MA:

“A strong-willed child embodies the characteristics of leaders, so I’m grateful to have a strong-willed daughter. What most defines her behavior is that she sets her own goals, and then uses her developing problem-solving skills to achieve what she wants. To maintain control, I set down clear and consistent rules governing routines, like ‘Ask to be excused from your high chair.’ Establishing routine is just part of it; it’s also about creating ritual (routine is how we organize our time; ritual is how we organize our mind). Ritual helps *her* manage impulses, which helps *me* navigate the rough patches.”

Libby Keibler, preschool teacher, the Beulah School, Pittsburgh, PA:

“Strong-willed children handle things better when they’re given choices—so they can have some autonomy—but you need to make sure the choices are ones you’re prepared to carry out. The trick is to create a win-win situation where there’s no struggle for power. One way to do this is with a contest: ‘Can you get your shoes on before I get my coat on?’ The idea is to let your child feel successful—but you also win, because her shoes are on. Another trick is to be silly: ‘Let’s see if you can put on your shoes while making a funny face!’ Or sing nonsense words, use hand motions, and dance. Have fun.”

