

REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

You Can't Make Me

[But I Can Be Persuaded]

Strategies for Bringing Out the Best in Your
Strong-Willed Child

Cynthia Ulrich Tobias

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P R E S S

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*To my strong-willed dad,
Robert Ulrich,
who has consistently shown me how to use
my strong-willed nature in a way
that brings honor and glory to God.*



*And to my strong but very patient, compliant mother,
Minnie Ulrich,
who has never quit praying for both of us!*

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Introduction to the Revised Edition

Here's How I Know It Works!

My very own strong-willed child, Mike, came bursting through the door with his usual force and energy. He was fresh from yet another week of being a counselor at a summer YMCA camp. I marveled at how quickly the years have passed and here he was—twenty years old and about to enter his junior year in college. Could it possibly be?

“Mom, I have to tell you something.”

I've learned to appreciate every opportunity to talk about his life, so I stopped what I was doing and listened.

“The camp kids were driving me crazy. I was so frustrated, I was ready to scream.” He paused and put his finger in the air to make a pronouncement. “So, I decided I'd better read one of your books.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Which book did you read, Mike?”

He shrugged and grinned. “*You Can't Make Me.*” Before I could react he rushed on. “And you know what? *It works!*”

I wasn't prepared for this. Was this my strong-willed child, who appears in every chapter of the book, telling me he was

now using it to understand the kids he was counseling at camp?

For the next twenty minutes Mike regaled me with examples he had read in the book, emphasizing the strategies he had used successfully with his campers. We reminisced over stories from the book that he remembered and laughed about the ones he had forgotten or was too young to recall.

Since the first edition of *You Can't Make Me! (But I Can Be Persuaded)* came out in 1999, literally thousands of parents and educators have taken the time to actually write or personally deliver overwhelmingly positive and grateful responses to the powerful and effective strategies in the book. I've been humbled and encouraged to see the hope in their eyes and hear the joy in their voices.

But I have to tell you, by far the most meaningful endorsement I could ask for is the one from Mike. After twenty years of living with and loving my strong-willed child, after the prayers and tears, trial and error, perseverance and frustration, failure and success, he is reading and endorsing the book that describes him as the quintessential strong-willed kid.

So as you read this revised and updated version of *You Can't Make Me!*, believe me when I say I'm still in the trenches with you. I've parented a great strong-willed child and his equally wonderful but more compliant twin brother. I will never be able to make the claim I did everything right. Far from it! I am

eternally grateful that God has been gracious in supplementing my well-intentioned and often inadequate efforts with His grace, love, and wisdom.

My fervent prayer is that you will benefit from the wisdom and advice of the many strong-willed children and their parents you are about to meet in this book. Most of all, no matter how things turn out, I pray you will be glad you never gave up on the relationship with your strong-willed child. You'll never be able to truly measure the difference it will make.

Part I

**Defining the
Strong-Willed Child**

Now here's a surprise:

The master praised the crooked manager!

And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens.

They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior.

—Luke 16:8-9

Who Qualifies as a Strong-Willed Child?

How Can You Be Sure It's Not Just Stubbornness?

A grandmother came around the corner and found her grandchild sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall.

“What! Are you in time-out again?” she asked.

“Oh, Grandma, it’s no big deal. I pretty much live here.”



Richard loved football, but he didn’t care much for studying. By his junior year in high school, his grades were so poor, there was no assurance he would even be able to graduate with his class. His parents, it seemed, had tried everything—threats, bribes, promises—to no avail. In desperation, Richard’s father issued an ultimatum: “Richard, if you don’t get those grades up immediately, you can’t play football.” And this boy who loved

football as much as life itself squared his shoulders, faced his dad, and quietly said, “Then forget football.” And everyone lost. Richard lost what he cared about most, and his parents lost what they believed was their only leverage.



Guests were about to leave and a mother wanted her three-year-old daughter to say good-bye. Strong-willed as she was, the child refused. The mother said, “You don’t have to say good-bye—just say *something*.”

With that the child waltzed into the room, held out her arms in a ballerina pose, and said, “Ta da!” then walked out of the room. She turned to her mother and said, “There, that should hold them for a while.”



“Angela!” Exasperation was evident in her mother’s voice. “Angela, I said get over here *right this minute!*”

Standing in the aisle of the department store, I watched the face of this beautiful five-year-old suddenly darken into an angry scowl. “No!” she cried. “I want to go see the toys *now!*”

Her mother looked exhausted as she grabbed Angela’s hand and began to drag her screaming daughter through the store.

As they passed me, the mother rolled her eyes and muttered, “Just another ordinary day.”



If you are the parent of a strong-willed child (SWC), you’ve fought hundreds of battles like this with your own child—probably before he turned two years old. You know how frustrating it can be to see your bright, loving, creative offspring instantly turn into a stubborn, immovable force. What did you do to deserve such defiance? How could your wonderful kid turn into such a monster?

Is it disobedience or determination?

You see them everywhere—these strong-willed kids. You may think they’re just stubborn, defiant, difficult, and argumentative. But that’s not actually the definition of “strong-willed” at all. Those words describe bad behaviors as a result of strong will that’s taken a wrong turn. Strong will, in and of itself, is a very positive trait. A strong-willed person is not easily daunted or discouraged, holds firm convictions, and doesn’t often accept defeat. A person using strong will in positive ways is fiercely loyal, determined to succeed, and often extraordinarily devoted to accomplishing goals.

So how do you know whether you truly have an inherently strong-willed child (SWC) or a child who is just temporarily defiant? After all, every individual comes into this world with a wonderfully complex and unique set of traits, characteristics, and temperaments. Research has also shown that we are pre-wired with certain tendencies when it comes to taking in and making sense of information. These preferences, or learning styles, determine how we learn, how we decide what's important, and how we communicate with the rest of the world.

It's not really surprising that two parents, who are probably pretty different from each other already, will have children who are an interesting mix of opposite styles. And if you have a strong-willed child, these differences can be magnified. As parents, we often believe our children should do things our way—after all, we are living proof that our way works! But SWCs may have very strong convictions about doing things that make sense to them too.

As parents, we can often overlook the fact that our children have their own views of the world, and we may wear ourselves out trying to change their basic nature as we try to get them to do things that make sense to us. Parents rarely set out to deliberately frustrate their children. Believe it or not, children don't usually try to intentionally annoy their parents. But when two opposing styles meet, something has to give.

A few years ago on a flight to Orlando, Florida, I sat next to a frustrated parent. Bob is a former fighter pilot for the United States Air Force. He was serving as an instructor as he prepared to retire early. I learned quickly that he had five kids and that two of them were driving him crazy. We laughed good-naturedly, and I began to tell him some of the principles I cover in my book *The Way They Learn*. As we talked about the different learning styles, he was intrigued.

“This is beginning to make sense,” he claimed. He leaned closer and told me why he was so frustrated with two of his beloved children. “How tough can it be,” he asked, “to remember to make a check mark in a little box on the chart posted on the refrigerator?” Before I could reply, he continued. “And don’t those kids realize you don’t brush your teeth before you put on your pajamas? You put on your pajamas first, then you brush your teeth.”

I grinned at him. “Bob, how do you eat M&M’S?”

He replied without hesitation. “Oh, I always eat the primary colors first.” He looked puzzled. “Why? How do you eat them?”

“Well, I just sort of pour them in my hand and pop them into my mouth.”

“Oh no! Don’t you realize that the Mars candy company has no specific formula for how many of each color go into each

individual bag? You can't just consume them randomly before you know what you've got!"

I laughed. In jest I said, "Bob, you are a sick man!"

He joined my laughter but suddenly looked thoughtful. "You know, I always thought my children were being disobedient if they didn't do everything my way. I've already figured out what works best and what methods are most efficient. I assumed that if they do it any other way it's just pure and simple insubordination!"

Bob and I spent the next couple hours discovering and celebrating the differences between him and his wife and each of their children. He was delighted to read through the learning styles charts and checklists, and he seemed relieved to learn some ways to motivate and inspire his own SWCs.

How strong willed are you or your child?

Strong will, of course, comes in all styles. In over twenty-five years of teaching and working with learning styles full time, however, I have found that SWCs, whether children or adults, have several characteristics in common. Take a few minutes to read the following checklist and mark all the items that describe you personally. Then go through the list again for each of your children and measure the degree of strong will each child appears to possess.

Checking your SWC quotient

Mark only those statements that are true *most* of the time for each member of the family:

The Strong-Willed Child (SWC)...

almost never accepts words like “impossible” or phrases like “it can’t be done.”

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

can move with lightning speed from being a warm, loving presence to being a cold, immovable force.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

may argue the point into the ground, sometimes just to see how far into the ground the point will go.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

if bored, has been accused of actually creating a crisis rather than have a day go by without incident.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

considers rules to be more like guidelines (“As long as I’m abiding by the ‘spirit of the law,’ why are you being so picky?”).

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

Defining the Strong-Willed Child

shows great creativity and resourcefulness—seems to always find a way to accomplish a goal.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

can turn what seems to be the smallest issue into a grand crusade or a raging controversy.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

doesn't usually do things just because "you're supposed to"—it needs to matter personally.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

often refuses to obey unconditionally—usually wants to negotiate a few terms before complying.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

is not afraid to try the unknown—to conquer the unfamiliar (although each SWC chooses his own risks, they all seem to possess the confidence to try new things).

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

can take what was meant to be the simplest request and interpret it as an offensive ultimatum.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

may not actually say the exact words to apologize, but almost always makes things right.

Parent _____ Parent _____ Child 1 _____ Child 2 _____

Your score: How much strong will do you have?

- 0–3 You've got it, but you don't use it much.
- 4–7 You use it when you need to, but not on a daily basis.
- 8–10 You've got a very healthy dose of it, but you can back off when you want to.
- 11–12 You don't leave home without it—and it's almost impossible not to use it.

It takes one to know one!

I've talked to thousands of SWCs over the past several years, including hundreds of prodigal sons and daughters, and they have given me a wealth of information to share with you. Their answers are consistent, and their insights are valuable.

I've also lived my life seeing firsthand how the mind of the SWC works—from the inside out. I was never what you would call a rebellious or defiant child. I grew up the daughter of a conservative, evangelical preacher, and I never rebelled against

my dad or caused him to feel ashamed of me. I was not a particularly loud or obnoxious child. I didn't talk back to teachers. In fact, you couldn't have traced half the trouble I caused back to me! Outwardly, I was quiet and compliant and basically easy to get along with.

But whenever I'm backed into a corner and told, "Do it... or else," I simply choose "else." I may not be confrontational or loud, but I know there is nothing I really *have* to do—except die, which I'm willing to do. And since I'm willing to die and you're not, I win. (Okay, I'm dead, but I win.) As you can imagine, this mind-set has always presented a unique challenge to my parents and others in authority over me. My mother tells me that as early as eighteen months I had already figured out no one could really *make* me do anything. She tried to insist I eat all the food that was placed before me. As soon as I figured out she was going to have me sit there until the food was gone, I simply dumped the remaining contents of the bowl on top of my head. It became a contest each meal to see if Mom could figure out which bite was my last one before the bowl was dumped and she had a mess to clean up. It didn't take long for her to decide the battle wasn't worth it!

My sister came along five years after I did, and she was nothing like me. Since it probably took my parents that long to work up the courage to have another child, I think they were relieved to find that Sandee was compliant and pleasant na-

tured. As the oldest, I used my position and strong-willed nature to both delight and traumatize my sister. I was definitely in charge, and Sandee followed my lead. Sometimes perceived as the bully or the dictator as well as the role model and encourager, I enjoyed having my sister recognize and appreciate my strengths.

Although my mother was convinced that even as adults we would never be able to do anything but fight with each other, Sandee and I are very close and enjoy a wonderful relationship. People often ask her if she grew up resenting me because I was such an SWC. She sweetly smiles and claims it was actually a blessing. “You see,” she explains, “I loved it. Since Cindy was always the one with the dangerous or adventurous ideas, I was never the one to get in trouble. I would just say it wasn’t my idea, wasn’t my fault—and Mom knew I was telling the truth.”

Even though I’m an SWC, I believe my best credential for speaking out on behalf of all SWCs is that I’m the parent of a strong-willed son. (My mother denies she prayed this would happen so I would know what it was like!) My son Mike was a typical SWC. One moment he was loving and thoughtful, the next he was relentlessly terrorizing his brother or mouthing off to his dad.

I’ve been forced to live what I teach every day. I’m not giving you advice from a quiet corner. I know firsthand that having an SWC can seem like both the best and the worst thing

that can happen to you. My SWC, Mike, is strong and intelligent and determined. He can ruthlessly drive himself to master a task or achieve a goal. And yet, the strength of his will puts him at risk for bad behavior when obstacles stand in the way of his plans or when someone like his twin brother, Robert, is not his normally compliant self. Mike can quickly change from a focused analytic to a frustrated, impatient person, loudly demanding his way. At times like this, I used to hear him screaming at his brother: “You’re *fired*, Robert! You’re not my brother anymore!” Of course, if Robert called his bluff and walked away, Mike was quick to call him back—immediately suggesting at least a slight compromise.

An opportunity with great potential

If any of this sounds familiar, you’ve come to the right place! I’m about to offer you more hope and encouragement about your relationship with your SWC than you may have thought possible. I realize we SWCs can drive you crazy. We know how to push the buttons that can reduce you to rage in a matter of seconds. We seem constantly to choose to do things the hard way. School and other traditional functions may leave us bored, frustrated, and restless.

But if you’re the parent of one of these wild and wonderful children, you’ve been given the opportunity to love, nurture,

and guide an individual who has great potential. Although you may have been led to believe that strong will simply denotes defiance, aggressiveness, and rebellion, steely determination does not have to be a negative trait! When you know how to bring out the best in your fiercely independent gift from God, you'll find incredible strength and possibilities in both of you without sacrificing any bottom-line accountability.

Many parents automatically assume that having a strong-willed child is a bad thing. While it can be challenging, by the time you finish reading this book, the chances are very good you will actually be excited you have such a child. It is a great gift to have a child with firm convictions, a high spirit, and a sense of adventure. Why not direct that wonderful and mysterious energy into the right channels, and use that marvelous determination to achieve positive results?

I often remind parents of SWCs that their children may change the world—after all, it's not likely that the world is going to change them! I also tell them that whatever seems to irritate them most about their SWC now is almost certain to be one of their SWC's greatest strengths and keys to success as an adult. You no doubt have a budding young artist, attorney, preacher, salesman, or other future persuasive professional right there in your home—exercising her powers of influence on you. After all, who else can she practice on? Who else do you really *want* her to practice on? Your SWC may be God's instrument

for making the world a better place. Think about some of the great leaders and innovators in our past—Thomas Jefferson, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Joan of Arc, Thomas Edison, and others. Each of these people held up under adversity, stood up for his or her convictions, and persisted against all odds. They refused to believe their dreams were impossible.

Of course, SWCs often travel a rocky road on the way to their success, and parents will certainly have an abundance of opportunities to develop patience and creative discipline techniques. You will be stretched and challenged beyond what you thought were your limits. But ultimately you can be rewarded with an SWC who loves God, who loves you, and who leaves your home with the ability to be a successful adult.

This book can place in your hands a priceless treasure—the gift of understanding your strong-willed child. I'll give you a glimpse into the mind of an SWC so you can begin to see how it works. I'll offer you practical strategies for how to motivate and inspire your SWC rather than simply to engage in power struggles and pointless battles. I'll give you guidelines to help you determine whether you need to do something drastic. What you are about to read and think about can—if you choose to act on it—heal your relationship with your SWC, bring peace to an argumentative family, and help you discover some wonderful things about yourself in the process.

Most of all, I hope this book shows you that instead of becoming exasperated and irritated with the SWCs in your life, you can honor and value what they do best while still holding them accountable for moral and spiritual values.