

Patience and Grace: Parenting a Stubborn Child

■ by Melinda Hammond, PsyD, LCPC



I have a confession: my child can out-stubborn me. He is the prototypical strong-willed child – when he sets his mind to something, nothing is going to change his path. At times, I feel ashamed. After all, I’m a psychologist who works with children. I should have all the answers and all the solutions.

But I don’t have all the answers. There is not an easy solution to dealing with a stubborn child. But I do know that God has the same problem that you and I have. He has a stubborn, strong-willed child or two (or 7 billion). By looking to His examples and instructions, I find that parenting my strong-willed little man becomes easier. There are many examples of how God parents us, but two of God’s traits seem particularly helpful when facing this challenge.

Grace. Grace for myself, when I feel overwhelmed, ashamed, annoyed, angry, or hurt. Grace for my child when he is having a rough day. Grace for my husband when he needs a break. Grace for the world we live in, which is not always built for strong-willed children! For my clients, I often define grace as “undeserved favor.” Often, a stubborn child will make it difficult to show him or her favor; it is those children in those moments who need our grace and favor the most. Remember that love is patient and kind, and that includes the love we have for our children, and the way we should treat ourselves. Matthew 6:14 beautifully states, “for if you forgive others for their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Is it possible that forgiving ourselves, and showing ourselves grace is also part of living a blessed life? Remember that Christ showed this grace to us by dying *while we were yet sinners*. That unconditional love is true grace.



Patience. What you plant today will not bear fruit until tomorrow. Galatians 6:9 states, “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” To deal with stubborn behavior, you may have to respond consistently 5, 10, or even 100 times. You can be just as stubborn as your child. Whether it’s ignoring behavior that is annoying but not dangerous, or putting your child in time-out for the 500th time this morning, consistency is the most difficult parenting technique out there. A good therapist will spend time working with you alone, helping support you as you learn to respond patiently and consistently to your child’s behavior. A strong willed child needs a strong willed parent who is willing to try new techniques with patience and persistence, rather than look for immediate results.

Parenting a strong-willed or stubborn child is not easy. It is also not a reflection of failure on your part; it simply means you have been given the job of parenting *differently* than you anticipated. Your parenting will be dependent upon grace and consistency. As you see the fruits of your own grace and patience (and I promise you will!), you will also grow in faith and love. I believe God knows exactly what we are going through, and He wants you to seek out help (in the form of a spouse, friend, pastor, or therapist) so that you can show these traits to your strong-willed child. **As you model these fruits, they will begin to bloom and grow in two hearts: yours and your child’s.**



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