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THIS BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED TO MY OWN LATE MOTHER, *who was blessed with a brilliant understanding of children. She intuitively grasped the meaning of discipline and taught me many of the principles I've described on the following pages. And, of course, she did an incredible job raising me, as everyone can plainly see today. But I've always been puzzled by one troubling question: Why did my fearless mother become such a permissive pushover the moment we made her a grandmother?*

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FOREWORD

IN 1978, when the first edition of *The Strong-Willed Child* was published, I had recently made a dramatic career move. I had resigned from the faculty of the University of Southern California School of Medicine where I had been an associate clinical professor of pediatrics for a number of years. My decision to leave this rewarding position resulted from an increasing awareness that the institution of the family was rapidly deteriorating—and that I needed to do what I could to help. Thus, I left my secure nest to create a humble little nonprofit outfit called Focus on the Family and began a radio program heard initially on thirty-four stations. Frankly, I wondered if the phone would ever ring.

More than twenty-five years later, the radio program and its derivatives are heard by 220 million people each day on 7,300 radio stations located in 122 countries around the world. The staff consists of 1,400 members, who are also committed to the preservation of the family. Upwards of 200,000 listeners and readers call or write to us each month, many of whom are asking questions about how to raise healthy, well-adjusted kids. Today, when I meet these moms and dads whose lives we have touched through the years, some of them smile and tell me stories about their children, some hug me, and some get teary eyed. Many will say, “Thank you for helping me raise my kids.” Being able to assist these special folks through the child-rearing years has provided one of the greatest satisfactions of my life, both personally and professionally.

One of the first writing projects I tackled after leaving academia in 1977 was the original version of the book you hold. As the title indicates, it focused on the basic temperaments of boys and girls and what influences them to do what they do. Of particular interest to me is a characteristic I call “the strength of the will.” Some kids seem to be born with an easygoing, compliant nature that makes them a joy to raise. As infants they don’t cry very often; they sleep through the night from the second week; they goo at their grandparents; they smile while being diapered; and they are very patient when dinner is overdue. And, of course, they never spit up on the way to church. During later childhood, they love to keep their room clean and they especially like doing their homework. There aren’t many of these supercompliant children, I’m afraid, but they are known to exist in some households (though they didn’t in ours).

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Just as surely as some children are naturally compliant, others seem to be defiant upon exit from the womb. They come into the world smoking a cigar and yelling about the temperature in the delivery room and the incompetence of the nursing staff and the way the doctors are running things. Long before their children are born, mothers of strong-willed children know there is something different going on inside, because their babies have been trying to carve their initials on the walls. In infancy, these children fairly bristle when their bottle is late and demand to be held throughout the day. Three o'clock in the morning is their favorite "playtime." Later, during toddlerhood, they resist all forms of authority and their greatest delights include "painting" the carpet with Mom's makeup or trying to flush the family cat down the toilet. Their frustrated parents wonder where they went wrong and why their child-rearing experience is so different from what they had expected. They desperately need a little coaching about what to do next.

That was the basic premise of my book back in 1978. But the years since then have passed very quickly, and the tough-as-nails kids about whom I was writing are now grown, having made the breathless journey from babyhood to adolescence and on into adulthood. Most of them now have strong-willed children of their own, which is rather humorous to contemplate. As kids, they gave their parents fits, but now the chickens have come home to roost. These new moms and dads are getting their just desserts, and they deserve everything their kids are doing to rattle their nerves. Their parents, to whom I addressed the original book, are likely to be grandparents now who have probably evolved into permissive pushovers just as my marvelous mom did when we made her a grandmother. And so the cycle of life continues, generation by generation, with each family member playing a prearranged part that feels entirely new, but which is actually rooted in antiquity.

It is with relish, therefore, that I return to this subject, which has been a lifelong fascination. Nearly 3 million copies of *The Strong-Willed Child* have sold in dozens of languages, but it became clear to me recently that the time had come to revise the manuscript. A wealth of new information has come to light since I first put my thoughts on paper (yes, on paper—I wrote the original manuscript with pencils on yellow pads, resulting in sheets that were taped together to produce a scroll that sometimes exceeded fifty feet. Inexplicably, I didn't get into the computer thing until the twentieth century was almost over).

But why did this book need to be retooled more than twenty-five years downstream? It is certainly not because the nature of children has changed since the seventies. Kids are kids and always will be. It is rather because the scientific understanding of inborn temperaments in little people is far greater now than it was two or three decades ago. Some of the more recent insights have come from careful research in the field of child development, and I will share those conclusions with you presently. For example, research on attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or "hyperactivity," as it was previously

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called, was in its infancy when I first sat down to write. Little was known about the disorder in those days, much less how to deal with it. Given this and other newer developments, it is time to reconsider the strong-willed child and how best to raise him or her. Far from contradicting my basic thesis, however, the intervening years have only served to validate the principles I described as a young psychologist and professor.

The other reason I set about revising *The Strong-Willed Child* is because I've now had many more years to work with families and to compare the approaches that succeed with those that clearly do not. Those experiences have been interwoven into the fabric of this edition, in hopes that they will be of help and encouragement to today's parents and for generations to come. Who knows? Maybe the testy boys and girls who are challenging their parents today will grow up to read these words in the distant future, searching desperately for advice about handling their own bratty little kids. I hope so.

Let's begin by acknowledging that rearing boys and girls can be a difficult assignment, especially today when the culture is battling mightily with parents for the hearts and minds of their kids. To bring them up properly requires the wisdom of Solomon and the determination of an Olympic champion. Admittedly, the job looks much easier than it is in reality. Overconfident parents, particularly those who are new to the responsibility, remind me of a man watching the game of golf for the first time. He thinks, *This is going to be simple. All you have to do is hit that little white ball out there in the direction of the flag.* He then steps up to the tee, draws back his club, and dribbles the "little white ball" about nine feet to the left. *Maybe,* he says to himself, *I ought to swing harder. That's what Tiger Woods does.* But the more he hacks at the ball, the farther into the rough he goes. So it is with child rearing. There are sand traps and obstacles everywhere for parents who are blessed with strong-willed kids. What those moms and dads need is a well-designed "game plan" for the inevitable challenges they will face at home. Without such a plan, they will find themselves muddling through by trial and error.

Consider the experience of a friend of mine, who was a recreational pilot when he was younger. On one occasion, he flew his single-engine plane toward his home base at a small country airport. Unfortunately, he waited too long to start back and arrived in the vicinity of the field as the sun dropped behind a mountain. By the time he maneuvered his plane into position to land, he could not see the hazy runway below. There were no lights to guide him and no one on duty at the airport. He circled the field for another attempt to land, but by then the darkness had become even more impenetrable. For two desperate hours, he flew his plane around and around in the blackness of the night, knowing that probable death awaited him when he ran out of fuel. Then as greater panic gripped him, a miracle occurred. Someone on the ground heard the continuing drone of his engine and realized his predicament. That merciful man drove his car back and forth on the runway to show my friend the location of the airstrip. Then he let his lights cast their beam from the far end while the plane landed.

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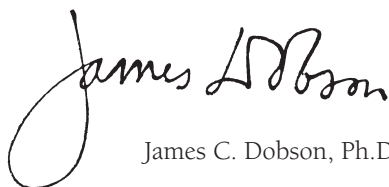
I think of that story now when I am descending at night in a commercial airliner. As I look ahead, I can see the green lights bordering the runway that tell the captain where to direct the plane. If he stays between those lighted boundaries, all will be well. But disaster lies to the left and to the right.

So it is with this challenging task of child rearing. What parents need are some runway lights—some reliable markers—that will illuminate the safe region between extremes. Two of those guiding principles are, quite simply, *love* and *control*. If they are understood and implemented properly by moms and dads, the relationship with their children is likely to be healthy—despite inevitable mistakes and shortcomings. But beware! It is often very difficult to balance love and control when dealing with a strong-willed child. The temptation is to tilt beyond one of the two boundaries—toward white-hot anger and oppressiveness, or toward permissiveness and disengagement. Why? Because the constant battles that these tougher kids precipitate can cause a parent to become a screamer and a tyrant or one who lets the child rule pathetically. There is danger for a youngster on either side of the “runway.” If the parental plane comes down wide or short, it will bump through the cornfield with unpredictable consequences. We’ll talk more about that presently.

The purpose of this book, then—both the original version and this revision—is to provide these and other understandings that will contribute to competent parenthood. We will deal specifically with the subject of discipline as it relates to the independent youngsters who are more challenging to raise.

Suffice it to say at this point that the rewards for doing a good job of parenting are worth all the blood, sweat, and tears that are invested in it. Although my children are now grown, the way they have turned out is the most satisfying accomplishment of my life. You can be sure I’ll say more about that in pages to come.

Well, let’s get started. It is my hope that this discourse will help illuminate the runway for those parents trying to pilot their children through the darkness.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James C. Dobson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

James C. Dobson, Ph.D.

THE WILD & WOOLLY WILL

AT ONE TIME, the Dobson household consisted of a mother and a father, a boy and a girl, one hamster, one parakeet, one lonely goldfish, and two hopelessly neurotic cats. We all lived together in relative harmony with a minimum of conflict and strife. But there was another member of our family who was less congenial and cooperative. He was a stubborn, twelve-pound dachshund named Sigmund Freud (Siggie), who honestly believed that he owned the place. All dachshunds tend to be independent, I'm told, but Siggie was a confirmed revolutionary. He was not vicious or mean; he just wanted to run things—and the two of us engaged in a power struggle throughout his lifetime.

Siggie was not only stubborn, but he wouldn't pull his own weight in the family. He wouldn't bring in the newspaper on cold mornings; he refused to chase a ball for the children; he didn't keep the gophers out of the garden; and he didn't do any of the usual tricks that most cultured dogs perform. Alas, Siggie refused to engage in any of the self-improvement programs that I initiated on his behalf. He was content just to trot through life, watering and sniffing and barking at everything that moved.

Sigmund was not even a good watchdog. This fact was confirmed the night we were visited by a prowler who entered our backyard at three o'clock in the morning. I suddenly awoke from a deep sleep, got out of bed, and felt my way through the house without turning on the lights. I knew someone was on the patio and Siggie knew it too, because the coward was crouched behind me! After listening to the thumping of my heart for a few minutes, I reached out to take hold of the rear doorknob. At that moment, the backyard gate quietly opened and closed. Someone had been standing three feet from me and that someone was now tinkering in my garage. Siggie and I held a little conversation in the

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darkness and decided that he should be the one to investigate the disturbance. I opened the back door and ordered my dog to “Attack!” But Siggie had just had one! He stood there throbbing and shaking so badly that I couldn’t even push him out the back door. In the noise and confusion that ensued, the intruder escaped (which pleased both dog and man).

Please don’t misunderstand me: Siggie was a member of our family and we loved him dearly. And despite his anarchistic nature, I did finally teach him to obey a few simple commands. However, we had some classic battles before he reluctantly yielded to my authority. The greatest confrontation occurred when I had been in Miami for a three-day conference. I returned to observe that Siggie had become boss of the house while I was gone. But I didn’t realize until later that evening just how strongly he felt about his new position as captain.

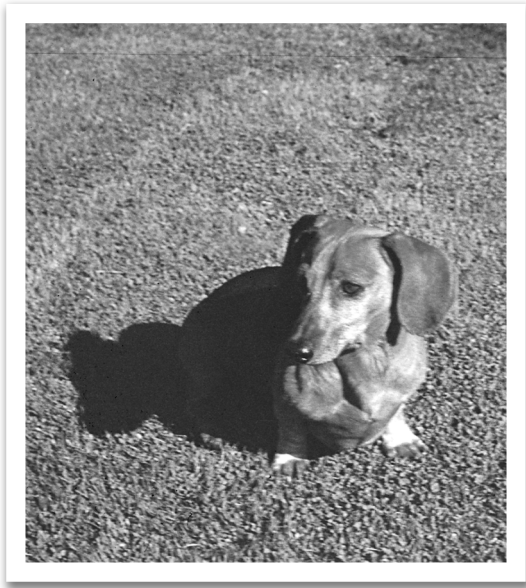
At eleven o’clock that night, I told Siggie to go get into his bed, which was a permanent enclosure in the family room. For six years, I had given him that order at the end of each day, and for six years Siggie had obeyed. On that occasion, however, he refused to budge. He was in the bathroom, seated comfortably on the furry lid of the toilet seat.

That was his favorite spot in the house, because it allowed him to bask in the warmth of a nearby electric heater. Incidentally, Siggie had to learn the hard way that it was extremely important that the *lid be down* before he left the ground. I’ll never forget the night he learned that lesson. He came thundering in from the cold and sailed through the air—and nearly drowned before I could get him out.

On the night of our great battle, I told Sigmund to leave his

warm seat and go to bed. Instead, he flattened his ears and slowly turned his head toward me. He braced himself by placing one paw on the edge of the furry lid, then hunched his shoulders, raised his lips to reveal the molars on both sides, and uttered his most threatening growl. That was Siggie’s way of saying, “Get lost!”

I had seen this defiant mood before and knew that I had to deal with it. The



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only way to make Siggie obey was to threaten him with destruction. Nothing else worked. I turned and went to my closet and got a small belt to help me “reason” with ’ol Sig. My wife, who was watching this drama unfold, told me that as soon as I left the room, Siggie jumped from his perch and looked down the hall to see where I had gone. Then he got behind her and growled.

When I returned, I held up the belt and again told the angry dog to get into his bed. He stood his ground so I gave him a firm swat across the rear end, and he tried to bite the belt. I popped him again and he tried to bite me. What developed next is impossible to describe. That tiny dog and I had the most vicious fight ever staged between man and beast. I fought him up one wall and down the other, with both of us scratching and clawing and growling. I am still embarrassed by the memory of the entire scene. Inch by inch I moved him toward the family room and his bed. As a final desperate maneuver, Siggie jumped on the couch and backed into the corner for one last snarling stand. I eventually got him into his bed, but only because I outweighed him two hundred to twelve!

The following night I expected another siege of combat at Siggie’s bedtime. To my surprise, however, he accepted my command without debate or complaint and simply trotted toward the family room in perfect submission. In fact, Siggie and I never had another “go for broke” stand.

It is clear to me now that Siggie was saying on the first night, in his canine way, “I don’t think you’re tough enough to make me obey.” Perhaps I seem to be humanizing the behavior of a dog, but I think not. Veterinarians will confirm that some breeds of dogs, notably dachshunds and shepherds, will not accept the leadership of their masters until human authority has stood the test of fire and proved itself worthy. I got that message across to Siggie in one decisive encounter, and we were good friends for the rest of his life.

This is not a book about the discipline of dogs. But there is an important aspect of my story that is highly relevant to the world of children. Just as surely as a dog will occasionally challenge the authority of his leaders, a child is inclined to do the same thing, only more so. This is no minor observation, for it represents a characteristic of human nature that has escaped the awareness of many experts who write books on the subject of discipline. When I wrote twenty-five years ago, there was hardly a text for parents or teachers that adequately acknowledged the struggle—the confrontation of wills—that strong-willed children seem to love. For them, adult leadership is rarely accepted unchallenged; it must be tested and found worthy before it is respected. It is one of the frustrating aspects of child rearing that most parents have to discover for themselves.

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THE HIERARCHY OF STRENGTH AND COURAGE

But why do some children, particularly those who are strong-willed, have such a pugnacious temperament? One of the simplistic answers (there is a more complete explanation in chapter 3) is that it reflects the admiration boys and girls have for strength and courage. They will occasionally disobey parental instructions for the precise purpose of testing the determination of those in charge. Why? Because they care deeply about the issue of “who’s toughest.” This helps explain the popularity of superheroes—Robin Hood and Tarzan and Spider-Man and Superman—in the folklore of children. It also explains why they often brag, “My dad can beat up your dad!” (One child said in response, “That’s nothing, my mom can beat up my dad too!”)

Whenever a youngster moves into a new neighborhood or a new school district, he usually has to fight (either verbally or physically) to establish himself in the hierarchy of strength. This respect for power and courage also makes children want to know how tough their leaders are. Thus, whether you are a parent, a grandparent, a Scout leader, a bus driver, or a schoolteacher, I can guarantee that sooner or later, one of the children under your authority will clench his little fist and take you on. Like Siggie at bedtime, he will say with his manner: “I don’t think you are tough enough to make me obey.” You had better be prepared to prove him wrong in that moment, or the challenge will happen again and again.

This defiant game, which I call Challenge the Chief, can be played with surprising skill by very young children. A father told me of taking his three-year-old daughter to a basketball game. The child was, of course, interested in everything in the gym except the athletic contest. Dad permitted her to roam free and climb on the bleachers, but he set definite limits regarding how far she could stray. He took her by the hand and walked with her to a stripe painted on the gym floor. “You can play all around the building, Janie, but don’t go past this line,” he instructed her. He had no sooner returned to his seat than the toddler scurried in the direction of the forbidden territory. She stopped at the border for a moment, then flashed a grin over her shoulder to her father, and deliberately placed one foot over the line as if to say, “Whatcha gonna do about it?” Virtually every parent the world over has been asked the same question at one time or another.

The entire human race is afflicted with the same tendency toward willful defiance that this three-year-old exhibited. Her behavior in the gym is not so different from the folly of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God had told them they could eat anything in the Garden except the forbidden fruit (“do not go past this line”). Yet they challenged the authority of the Almighty by deliberately

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disobeying His commandment. Perhaps this tendency toward self-will is the essence of original sin that has infiltrated the human family. It certainly explains why I place such stress on the proper response to willful defiance during childhood, for that rebellion can plant the seeds of personal disaster. The weed that grows from it may become a tangled briar patch during the troubled days of adolescence.

When a parent refuses to accept his child's defiant challenge, something changes in their relationship. The youngster begins to look at his mother and father with disrespect; they are unworthy of her allegiance. More important, she wonders why they would let her do such harmful things if they really loved her. The ultimate paradox of childhood is that boys and girls want to be led by their parents but insist that their mothers and fathers earn the right to lead them.

On behalf of those readers who have never experienced such a confrontation, let me describe how a determined kid is typically constructed. At birth he looks deceptively like his more compliant sibling. He weighs seven pounds and is totally dependent on those who care for him. Indeed, he would not survive for more than a day or two without their attention. Ineffectual little arms and legs dangle aimlessly in four directions, appearing to be God's afterthoughts. What a picture of vulnerability and innocence he is!

Isn't it amazing, given this beginning, what happens in twenty short months? Junior then weighs twenty-five pounds and he's itching for action. This kid who couldn't even hold his own bottle less than two years earlier now has the gall to look his two-hundred-pound father straight in the kisser and tell him where to get off? What audacity! Obviously, there is something deep within his soul that longs for control. He will work at achieving it for the rest of his life.

When our children were young, we lived near one of these little spitfires. He was thirty-six months old at the time and had already bewildered and overwhelmed his mother. The contest of wills was over. He had won it. His sassy talk, to his mother and anyone else who got in his way, was legendary in the neighborhood. Then one day my wife watched him ride his tricycle down the driveway and into the street, which panicked his mother. We lived on a curve and the cars came around that bend at high speed. The woman rushed out of the house and caught up with her son as he pedaled down the street. She took hold of his handlebars to redirect him, and he came unglued.

"Get your dirty hands off my tricycle!" he screamed. His eyes were squinted in fury. As Shirley watched in disbelief, this woman did as she was told. The life of her child was in danger, yet this mother did not have the courage to make him

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obey her. He continued to ride down the street while she trailed along behind, hoping for the best.

How could it be that a tiny little boy at three years of age was able to buffalo his thirty-year-old mother in this way? Clearly, she had no idea how to manage him. He was simply tougher than she—and they both knew it. This mild-mannered woman had produced an iron-willed youngster who was willing to fight with anyone who tried to run him in, and you can be sure that his mom's physical and emotional resources were continually drained by his antics. We lost track of this family, but I'm sure this kid's adolescent years were something to behold.

A LESSON IN A SUPERMARKET

In thinking about the characteristics of compliant and defiant children, I sought an illustration to explain the vastly differing thrusts of human temperaments. I found an appropriate analogy in a supermarket. Imagine yourself in a grocery store, pushing a cart up the aisle. You give the basket a small shove, and it glides at least nine feet out in front and then comes to a gradual stop. You walk along happily tossing in the soup and ketchup and loaves of bread. Grocery shopping is such an easy task, for even when the cart is burdened with goods, it can be directed with one finger.

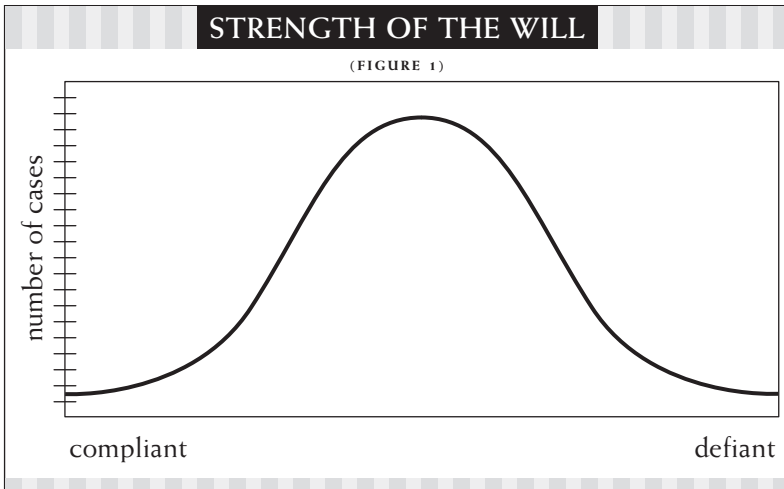
But buying groceries is not always so blissful. On other occasions, you select a cart that ominously awaits your arrival at the front of the market. When you push the stupid thing forward, it tears off to the left and knocks over a stack of bottles. Refusing to be outmuscled by an empty cart, you throw all your weight behind the handle, fighting desperately to keep the ship on course. It seems to have a mind of its own as it darts toward the eggs and careens back in the direction of a terrified grandmother in green tennis shoes. You are trying to do the same shopping assignment that you accomplished with ease the week before, but the job feels more like combat duty today. You are exhausted by the time you herd the contumacious cart toward the checkout counter.

What is the difference between the two shopping baskets? Obviously, one has straight, well-oiled wheels that go where they are guided. The other has crooked, bent wheels that refuse to yield.

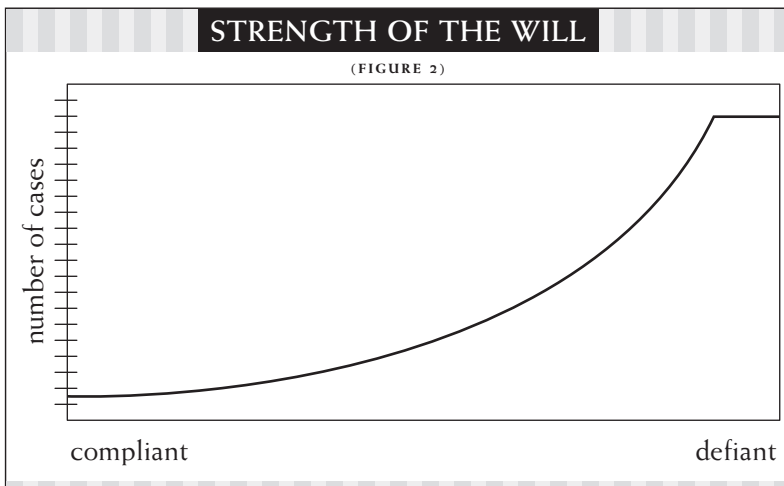
Do you get the point? We might as well face it; some kids have crooked wheels! They do not want to go where they are led, because their own inclinations take them in other directions. Furthermore, the parent who is pushing the cart must expend seven times the energy to make it move, compared with the parent of a child with straight wheels. (Only mothers and fathers of strong-willed children will fully comprehend the meaning of this illustration.)

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But how is the strength of the will distributed among children? My original assumption was that this aspect of human temperament is represented by a typical bell-shaped curve. In other words, I presumed that a relatively small number of very compliant kids appeared at one end of the continuum and an equally small number of defiant youngsters were represented at the other. The rest, comprising the majority, were likely to fall somewhere near the middle of the distribution, like this:



However, having talked to at least 100,000 harried parents, I'm convinced that my supposition was wrong. The true distribution probably looks more like this:



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Don't take this observation too literally. Maybe it only *seems* that the majority of toddlers are confirmed anarchists. Furthermore, there is a related phenomenon regarding sibling relationships that I have never been able to explain. When there are two children in the family, one is likely to be compliant and the other defiant. Who knows why it works out that way. There they are, born to the same parents, but as different as though they came from different planets. One cuddles to your embrace and the other kicks you in the navel. One is a natural sweetheart and the other goes through life like hot lava. One follows orders and the other gives them. Quite obviously, they are marching to a different set of drums.

Former U.S. president Franklin Roosevelt was clearly a strong-willed child and grew up to be a very strong-willed man. When he was a boy, he once strung a string across the top of the stairs where it could not be seen. Predictably, his nurse came along carrying a supper tray and tripped, making what must have been a spectacular plunge downward. The record does not reveal what punishment he received for this wicked trick. We are told, however, that Franklin was very bossy with his peers and that he liked to win at everything. When he was once scolded for the way he treated other children, he said, "Mummie, if I didn't give the orders, nothing would happen."¹ *That is a strong-willed child.*

Temperamental differences often create serious relational problems within the family. The strong-willed child faces constant discipline and is subjected to many threats and finger-wagging lectures, while his angelic brother, little Goody Two-shoes, polishes his halo and soaks up the warmth of parental approval. They are pitted against each other by the nature of their divergent personalities and may spend a lifetime scratching and clawing one another. (Chapter 9 offers specific suggestions regarding the problem of sibling rivalry and conflict.)

I have described the approach to life taken by the tougher kids. Let's look quickly at the easygoing child, who spends most of his time trying to make his parents happy. In reality, he needs their praise and approval; thus his personality is greatly influenced by this desire to gain their affection and recognition. A word of displeasure or even the slightest frown from his parents can disturb him. He is a lover, not a fighter.

A few years ago I talked with the mother of one of these pleasant kids. She was concerned about the difficulties her son was having in nursery school. He was being bullied every day by the more aggressive children, but it was not within him to defend himself. Thus, each afternoon when his mother came to get him, he had been whacked and harassed again by these other boys. Even the girls were joining in the fun.

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“You must defend yourself!” his mother said again and again. “Those other children will keep hitting you until you make them stop!”

Each day she urged her little lover to be more assertive, but it contradicted his nature to do so. Finally, his frustration became so great that he began reaching for the courage to follow his mother’s advice. As they rode to school one morning he said, “Mom! If those kids pick on me again today, I’m—I’m—I’m going to beat them up! Slightly.”

How does one beat up someone else “slightly”? I don’t know, but it made perfect sense to this compliant child. He didn’t want to use any more force than was absolutely necessary to survive. Why? Because he had a peace-loving nature. His parents didn’t teach it to him. It was rooted deep within his psyche.

I must make it clear that the compliant child is not necessarily wimpy or spineless. That fact is very important to our understanding of his nature and how he differs from his strong-willed sibling. The distinction between them is not a matter of confidence, willingness to take risks, sparkling personalities, or other desirable characteristics. Rather, the issue under consideration here is focused on the strength of the will—on the inclination of some children to resist authority and determine their own course, as compared with those who are willing to be led. It is my supposition that these temperaments are prepackaged before birth and do not have to be cultivated or encouraged. They will make themselves known soon enough.

By the way, there is another category of temperaments in children that some parents will recognize instantly. These kids are not really strong-willed—at least, their assertiveness is not expressed in the same way. The distinction here is not one of independence and aggressiveness. It is a matter of tactics. They rarely challenge the authority of their parents or teachers in a stiff-necked manner, but they are willful nonetheless. I call them “sneaky.” Adults think these youngsters are going along with the program, but inside, there’s subversion afoot. When no one is looking, they break the rules and push the limits. When caught, as inevitably they are, they may lie or rationalize or seek to hide the evidence. The appropriate approach to these sneaky kids is not appreciably different from handling the strong-willed child. Sooner or later, his or her self-will can be expected to break into the open, usually during early adolescence. Then it’s “Katie, bar the door.”

I’ll close this introductory chapter by offering two more observations for parents who are raising strong-willed children. First, it is very common for these moms and dads to feel great guilt and self-condemnation. They are trying so hard to be good parents, but the struggle for control that goes on at home day af-

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ter day leaves them frustrated and fatigued. No one told them that parenthood would be this difficult, and they blame themselves for the tension that arises. They had planned to be such loving and effective parents, reading fairy tales by the fireplace to their pajama-clad angels, who would then toddle happily off to bed. The difference between life as it is and life as it ought to be is distressing. We'll talk more about that presently.

Second, I have found that the parents of compliant children don't understand their friends with defiant youngsters. They intensify guilt and embarrassment by implying, "If you would raise your kids the way I do mine, you wouldn't be having those awful problems." May I say to both groups that willful children can be difficult to manage even when parents handle their responsibilities with great skill and dedication. It may take several years to bring such a youngster to a point of relative obedience and cooperation within the family unit, and indeed a strong-willed child will be a strong-willed individual all her life. While she can and must be taught to respect authority and live harmoniously with her neighbors, she will always have an assertive temperament. That is not a bad thing. It simply "is." During the childhood years, it is important for parents not to panic. Don't try to "fix" your tougher boy or girl overnight. Treat that child with sincere love and dignity, but require him or her to follow your leadership. Choose carefully the matters that are worthy of confrontation, then accept her challenge on those issues and win decisively. Reward every positive, cooperative gesture she makes by offering your attention, affection, and verbal praise. Then take two aspirin and call me in the morning.

Well, that is the subject of our discussion. In the chapters to come, we will explore ways of leading the toughie, approaches to discipline at each age level, reasons why he is the way he is, and many other aspects of child rearing. There's so much to share.

Before pressing on, however, let me give you an update on our little dachshund, Siggie, whom people still ask me about. This delightful dog lived for seventeen years and gave our family so much pleasure, despite his revolutionary tendencies. Shortly before he died, some teenagers drove through our neighborhood at three o'clock in the morning and tossed a hapless pup out of their car. She showed up at our front door the next morning, scared, hungry, and lost. We didn't want another dog at the time, even though Siggie had seen his better days. We were especially disinterested in owning a cur whose daddy had been a traveling man. Nevertheless, we couldn't bring ourselves to take her to the pound. While we were trying to find her another home, we fell head over heels in love with this gentle, vulnerable animal that our daughter named Mindy.

The Wild & Woolly Will

Mindy grew to become the most beautiful, noble dog I've ever owned. She simply had no will of her own, except to do the bidding of her masters. Probably because of the unknown horrors of her puppyhood, she could not stand any expression of displeasure on my part. If scolded, she would jump in my lap and hide her eyes in the crook of my arm. Her only wish was to be with her human companions. Many times as I sat reading or studying at my desk, Mindy would quietly slip in beside me and rest her head on my knee. I'll tell you, I'm a sucker for any living thing with that kind of need. When forced to stay outside, Mindy would sit and stare at us through the family-room window. My wife would get uncomfortable with the dog's pleading brown eyes focused on her every move, so she actually pulled down the shades. Then Shirley would mutter in exasperation, "Mindy, get a life!"

An incident occurred several years later that illustrated Mindy's sweet nature. Our family had gone on a two-week vacation and left her alone in the backyard. A neighbor boy came by once each day to feed her and give her fresh water. Thus, her physical needs were met, but we underestimated the loneliness she must have experienced throughout those fourteen days. Why else would this forty-pound dog have gone into our garage and dug through the boxes of toys that our children, Danae and Ryan, had outgrown? She found the stuffed animals that had long since been discarded and brought them one at a time to her bed near the house. When we arrived home, Mindy was lying on her blanket with eight of these furry friends arranged in front of her.

I know! I know! No dog deserves the affection our family bestowed on this ol' hound, and some of my readers will think it foolish. For my part, however, I believe God designed this species specifically for companionship and devotion to man. (Who knows why the Lord made cats?) Surprisingly, it is believed that the death rate for people who have lost a spouse is 500 percent lower the first year for those who own a dog. Take my ad-



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vice: If you need something to love, go to the nearest pound and look for a furry little pup who'll think you're the neatest boss in the world! That's what Mindy thought about the Dobsons.

But, alas, this beautiful animal is also gone. My wife, Shirley, called her one day and she failed to come. That had never happened before. We found her lying by the side of the house where she had fallen. Mindy died of lymphoma that had spread throughout her body. And so ended a twelve-year love affair between a devoted dog and her affectionate masters. Good-bye, gentle friend.

I have shared these two dog stories, describing Siggie and Mindy, to illustrate the difference in temperaments between the two animals we have loved. One of them was determined to run the world and the other was deliriously happy just to be part of the family. They represented opposite ends of the canine universe.

Well, I hope the analogy is clear. In this book, we're focusing not on dogs but on the varied and infinitely complex personalities of children. We'll talk in subsequent chapters about what those temperaments mean for parents and how that understanding helps us raise our children properly.

(By the way, I was only kidding when I asked why God created cats. It was a joke. Honest. I didn't mean it. Please don't write and say hateful things to me. Like Mindy, I can't stand to be criticized.)

A FINAL WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

IT'S TIME NOW to put a ribbon on this pleasant foray into the life of strong-willed children and those who have the responsibility of raising them. I'll close by sharing a few thoughts that come straight from my heart.

Many wonderful emotions accompany the exhilarating privilege of bringing a baby into the world and then watching that little tyke begin to grow and learn and develop. How well I remember our son and daughter taking their first step, saying their first word, riding their first tricycle, praying their first prayer, and progressing rapidly through the many other exciting milestones of childhood. The first day of kindergarten was a highly emotional morning for me, when I placed our precious little girl on the steps of the bus, moved back to take her picture, and watched as she and the other children rode slowly down the street. Then I wiped away a tear as I walked back to the house. Our baby was growing up.

There would be many other joyful and bittersweet experiences along the way, as Shirley and I gradually realized the breathtaking brevity of the parenting years. Even when our kids were in elementary school, we were already starting to dread the day when our parenting responsibilities would be over. Predictably, in what seemed like a moment of time, a cold wind of change blew through our home, leaving an empty nest that took some getting used to.

Yes, being a mom or dad is one of the most marvelous experiences in living, and I feel compassion for infertile couples who have been denied the privilege of procreation. But men and women who are granted that precious gift know that a measure of pain and sorrow comes with it. Kids often struggle with a variety of learning problems, physical disabilities, accidents, diseases, and/or social difficulties. Then come the tumultuous years of adolescence when, for

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some teens more than others, every day can be a challenge. All of these stress points are exacerbated when a child has a willful temperament and a tendency to fuss and argue and disobey. Parents raising such a youngster sometimes feel as though they live every day on a battlefield.

It is on behalf of those frustrated, discouraged, and confused parents that I have written this book. I have wanted, especially, to put an arm around moms and dads who feel like an utter failure in this most important responsibility in life. They (perhaps you) wanted to be a perfect parent, doing that job with greater success than any other. Instead, it now looks as though every good intention has been misinterpreted, resented, and resisted. Is that where you are today?

At times do you find yourself thinking, *I love this kid more than anything in the world, but I don't really like him or her very much? We can't get along for more than ten minutes without clashing over relatively insignificant matters. Why does this child make me so angry, when what I want most is harmony and love? Why is our relationship so unsatisfying and disturbing? What did I do to mess up something that began with such promise and hope? Not only have I failed my child, I have failed God, too.*

Let's talk about those feelings for a moment, which are common at one time or another within almost all caring moms and dads. Parenthood can be a very guilt-inducing proposition. Babies come into our life when we are young and immature, and there are no instruction manuals to guide our first halting steps. There is no manufacturing tag on a newborn's wrist that says, "Some assembly required." So we take these tiny human beings home with us, not yet knowing who they are, and then proceed to bumble along as best we can. As a consequence, many of the day-by-day decisions we make on their behalf are the result of sheer guesswork, as we hope against hope that we are doing the right thing. Our own inadequacies also get in the way. We become tired and frustrated and selfish, which sometimes affects our judgment. In those moments, we react without thinking and realize the next morning that we handled things all wrong.

In short, children are so maddeningly complex that it is impossible to raise them without making many blunders and mistakes. After about twenty years of on-the-job training, we begin to figure out what parenting is all about. By then it is time to let go and pretend we don't care anymore.

Added to these difficulties are our own personal problems, which can include marital conflict or divorce, physical illness, financial pressures, and the other cares of living. Our unmet needs, such as those experienced by single parents, also can lead us into behavior that will later seem terribly foolish. Do I

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sound as though I'm whining here? I hope not. I'm simply attempting to articulate the discomfort that occurs for parents of strong-willed children when they begin to feel that they have botched the assignment. (The parents of compliant children may not fully understand this emotional reaction, although there is usually enough stress in child rearing to affect everybody.)

Despite these discouraging moments, it is my firm conviction that bearing and raising children is worth everything it costs us. Along with the difficulties come the greatest joys and rewards life has to offer. How could that be true? How can the very thing that brings us anxiety and frustration be the source of such happiness and fulfillment? There is an obvious contradiction here that bears consideration.

Christian writer C. S. Lewis tried to express the palpable pain that he experienced when he lost his wife to cancer. He would not have been so devastated by her passing, he said, if he had not allowed himself to love her with all his heart. In the movie *Shadowlands*, based on this period of Lewis's life, he wondered if it would have been better never to have loved at all and avoided the risk of losing the woman he adored. It would certainly have been safer to live in a fortress, protecting himself from disappointment and grief by remaining emotionally detached and uncaring. Lewis considered these responses to sorrow and concluded that, in the end, love is worth the risk. This is the way he penned it:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully around with hobbies and little luxuries . . . lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. . . . The only place outside heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is hell!¹

Then Lewis concluded: "We love to know that we are not alone."

Doesn't this insight speak eloquently of the pain associated with parenthood? It certainly does to me. This is what bearing and raising children comes down to. Loving those we have borne is a risky business, but one that also brings great joy and happiness. Even though there are often trials and tears associated with the challenge, it is a noble journey. We as parents are given the privilege of

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taking the raw materials that comprise a brand-new human being and then molding him or her day-by-day into a mature, disciplined, productive, and God-fearing adult who will someday live in eternity. Doing that job right, despite its setbacks and disappointments, is one of the greatest achievements in living.

I want to offer hope to those moms and dads today who are demoralized at this stage of the journey. First, you must recognize that strong-willed children are *not* a liability, and you should never let yourself feel victimized or cheated by having borne one of them. DO NOT compare your child with the “perfect” children of your relatives or friends. They will have their share of problems too in time. Admittedly, a tough-minded kid is tougher to raise and at times may push you right to the edge. But that wonderful assertiveness and determination will be an asset when your child is grown. That irritating temperament was a gift from God, and He makes no mistakes.

You should also recognize that these kids often possess a certain strength of character that will help them grab the opportunities that come their way. When they make up their minds to reach for something, they are likely to stay with it until the goal is achieved. They are also less susceptible to peer pressure, maybe not during early adolescence, but as maturity begins to set in. What I said before bears repeating. Though they typically argue and fight and complain throughout their years at home, the majority will turn around when they reach young adulthood and do what their parents most desire. Better days are around the corner.

However, the realization of that potential appears to depend on the provision of a structured early home environment led by loving, fair-minded mothers and fathers who are clearly tougher and wiser than their children. Those who are reasonably effective in shaping the will without breaking the spirit are going to appreciate the person their child eventually becomes.

That is what we found when we surveyed thirty-five thousand parents. More than 85 percent of adult strong-willed children who rebelled significantly during their teenage years came back to what they had been taught—entirely or at least somewhat. Only 15 percent were so headstrong that they rejected their family’s core values in their midtwenties. These findings tell us that you, too, are probably doing a better job with your kids than you think. Future years will confirm that the guilt that haunted your thoughts and invaded your dreams was unjustified and self-imposed.

In short, the youngster who sometimes exasperates you today probably

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has little green buds growing all over his tree, even if all you see now are the barren twigs of winter. It will take time for him or her to flower, of course, but springtime is on its way. Trust me on this one.

It is always encouraging for me to hear from parents who have lived through the stresses of parenting and discovered that the principles of good parenting are valid. They work because they came from the Creator of children. One mother of a very strong-willed child sent me a letter some years ago after concluding, much too early, that my advice *didn't* work and that I must not have understood hardnosed youngsters like her own. This is what she wrote:

Dear Dr. Dobson:

After purchasing your book, The Strong-Willed Child, I must tell you I was disappointed. The beginning was encouraging, but then the rest was devoted to general child-rearing techniques. I thought the entire book would be written about the strong-willed child. Are you sure you know what one is? Nearly every child is strong-willed, but not every child is "strong-willed!"

Our third (and last) daughter is "strong-willed!" She is twenty-one months old now, and there have been times when I thought she must be abnormal. If she had been my firstborn child there would have been no more in this family. She had colic day and night for six months, then we just quit calling it that. She was simply unhappy all the time. She began walking at eight months and she became a merciless bully with her sisters. She pulled hair, bit, hit, pinched, and pushed with all her might. She yanked out a handful of her sister's long black hair.

This mother went on to describe the characteristics of her tyrannical daughter, which I have heard thousands of times. She then closed, advising me to give greater emphasis to the importance of corporal punishment for this kind of youngster.

I wrote her a cordial letter in reply and told her I understood the frustration. I attempted to encourage her and offer hope for the future. Five years later, she wrote me again:

Dear Dr. Dobson,

This letter is long overdue, but thank you! Thank you for a caring reply to what was probably not a very nice letter from a discouraged mom. Thank you for your positive remarks, the first I had had in a long time.

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Perhaps you would be interested in an update on our Sally Ann. Back when I wrote to you, she was probably a perfect “10” when it came to strong-willedness. “Difficult” hardly scratches the surface of descriptive words for her babyhood. As Christian parents, we tried every scriptural method we could find for dealing with her. I had decided she was abnormal. Something so innocent as offering her morning juice (which she loved) in the wrong glass threw her into thirty minutes of tantrums—and this was before she could really talk! Family dinners were a nightmare.

Before she turned two, Sally Ann would regularly brutalize her older sisters, ages four, eight, and twelve, even bringing the twelve-year-old to tears many times. A spanking from me did not deter her in the least. Finally, in prayer one day the Lord plainly showed me that her sisters must be allowed to retaliate—something I was strictly against (and still am!). However, in this case, all I can say is that it worked. I carefully and clearly told my three girls (with little Sally Ann in my lap) what they were to do the next time they were attacked by their littlest sister: they were to give her a good smack on the top of her chubby little leg, next to her diaper. Sally got the point: within two days the attacks ceased.

Disciplining our youngest was never easy, but with God’s help, we persevered. When she had to be spanked, we could expect up to an hour of tantrums. It would have been so easy to give in and ignore the misbehavior, but I am convinced that, without it, our Sally would have become at best a holy terror, and at worst, mentally ill. Tell your listeners that discipline does pay off, when administered according to the Word of God.

Sally today is a precious seven-year-old and a joy to her family. She is still rather strong-willed, but it is well within normal limits now! She is very bright and has a gentle, creative, and sympathetic nature unusual in one so young. I know the Lord has great plans for her. She has already asked Jesus into her life and knows how to call upon Him when she has a need (like fear from a nightmare, etc.).

In conclusion, though I still don’t think you went far enough in your book, loving discipline certainly is the key. With perseverance!

Thank you and may God’s continued blessing be upon you and your household and your ministry, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*In His love,
Mrs. W. W.*

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Once again, I wrote to this mother and concluded with these words:

Thank you too, Mrs. W., for your original letter and for this update. It was a special treat to hear from you again. You're obviously on the right track with Sally Ann. Hang in there during the adolescent challenges that still lie before you.

James Dobson

If Mrs. W. reads this revised edition of *The New Strong-Willed Child*, I want her to know that I had her in mind when I set out to rewrite it. I'd like to ask her if I got it closer to the target this second time around. She sounds like a mom I would like to meet.

Let's review the important concepts I have put forward one more time, focusing especially on the principles calculated to produce a positive outcome in the years to come.

1. You should not blame yourself for the temperament with which your child was born. She is simply a tough kid to handle, and your task is to match her stride for stride.
2. Your strong-willed child is in greater danger because of his inclination to test the limits and scale the walls. Your utmost diligence and wisdom will be required to deal with him. You simply have to be tougher than he is, but do it without being angry and oppressive.
3. If you fail to understand his lust for power and independence, you can exhaust your resources and bog down in guilt. It will benefit no one.
4. For parents who have just begun, take charge of your baby now, hold tightly to the reins of authority, and quickly begin building into her an attitude of respect and obedience. You will need every ounce of awe you can muster in coming years. Once you have established your right to lead, begin to let go of the reins systematically, year by year.
5. Don't panic, even during the storms of adolescence. They never last forever. The sun will shine again, producing, perhaps, a beautiful rainbow over your spirit. *You're going to get through this.*
6. Don't let your child stray too far from you emotionally. Stay in touch. Don't write him off, even when your every impulse is to do just that. He needs you now more than ever before.
7. Give that kid time to find herself, even if she appears not to be searching.

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8. Most importantly, I urge you to hold your children before the Lord in fervent prayer day by day by day. Begin every morning with a prayer for wisdom and guidance. I am convinced that there is no other true source of confidence in parenting. There is not enough knowledge in the books, mine or anyone else's, to counteract the evil that surrounds our kids today. We must bathe them in fervent prayer when we are in our prayer closet, saying words similar to these:

“Lord, You know my inadequacies. You know my weaknesses, not only in parenting, but in every area of my life. I'm doing the best I can to raise my kids properly, but it may not be good enough. As You provided the fish and the loaves to feed the five thousand hungry people, now take my meager effort and use it to bless my family. Make up for the things I do wrong. Satisfy the needs that I have not met. Compensate for my blunders and mistakes. Wrap Your great arms around my children, and draw them close to You. And be there when they stand at the great crossroads between right and wrong. All I can give them is my best, and I will continue to do that. I submit them to You now and rededicate myself to the task You have placed before me. The outcome rests securely in Your hands.”

I've found that God is faithful, as a loving Father, to hear and answer that cry of the heart. Turn to Him for solace when you've reached the end of your rope. He will be there to comfort you and work within the soul of your beloved child.

Well, we began this discussion twelve chapters ago with the story of our dog, Siggie, and his revolutionary tendencies. Let's end with an update. Siggie is long gone now, but we still miss him. It's hard to explain how a worthless old hound could be so loved by his family, although I'm sure other dog lovers will understand our sentiment. We were somewhat prepared for Siggie's demise, after being told by the vet that he had developed a progressive heart leak, but the moment of crisis came without warning.

I was brushing my teeth early one morning when I heard Siggie's sharp cry. He could scream like a baby, and my wife rushed to his assistance.

“Jim, come quickly!” she said. “Siggie is having a heart attack!” I rushed into the family room, toothbrush still in hand. Siggie was lying just outside his bed, and he appeared to be in great pain. He was hunched down on his paws; his eyes unfocused and glassy. I bent down and petted him gently and agreed that he was probably dying. I was not sure what to do for a dog in the midst of a

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heart attack, since paramedics are somewhat sensitive about offering their services to animals. I certainly wasn't going to give him CPR. I picked up Siggie and laid him carefully on his bed, and he rolled on one side and remained completely motionless. His feet were rigidly held together, and it did, indeed, look as though the end had come.

I returned to my study to telephone the veterinarian, but Shirley called me again. She had taken a closer look at the immobile dog and discovered the nature of his problem. (Are you ready for this?) There are little claws or toenails on the sides of a dog's legs, and Siggie had somehow managed to get them hooked! That is why he couldn't move, and why he yelped when he tried to walk. There is not another dog anywhere in the world that could have handcuffed (pawcuffed?) himself, but with Siggie anything was possible. Shirley unhooked his toenails, and the senile old dog celebrated by running around like a puppy again.

When I am an old man thinking back on the joys of parenting—the Christmas seasons and the camping trips and the high-pitched voices of two bubbly children in our home—I will also remember a stubborn little dachshund named Sigmund Freud and his mild-mannered canine successor, Mindy, who made such important contributions to our family throughout those happy days. One of them was stubborn as a mule; the other just wanted to do everything right. But we loved them both, and so it was with our children. One of them was strong-willed and the other compliant (but sneaky at times). They are grown now, and both of them turned out to be great human beings who love their parents (especially me) and are deeply committed to Jesus Christ. It doesn't get any better than that.

*“I have no greater joy than to hear
that my children are walking in the truth.”*

(3 JOHN 4)

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER 1

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