

Kids' Personality Differences

The complaint child is more at peace with himself or herself, as well as with others.

I have frequently addressed the stark differences between the strong-willed child and the compliant child. At Focus on the Family, we often hear from parents who testify to having at least one of each—and all have attested that the contrast between them is as dramatic as night and day. One child is a spitfire, and the other is a sweetheart. Many parents are interested in knowing what these differences will mean for their kids long-term, beyond everyday issues of discipline and family harmony.

Some time ago, I conducted a survey of more than 35,000 parents to help answer those questions. It is described in detail in my book *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*, but let me boil down 11 of the most important findings. These conclusions represent common traits and characteristics that may or may not apply to every child in each category. They indicate what typically happens with very strong-willed children (SWC) and very compliant children (CC) as the years unfold.

1. In the human family, there are nearly three times as many SWCs as CCs. Nearly every family with multiple children has at least one SWC.

2. Male SWCs outnumber females by about 5 percent, and female CCs outnumber males by about 6 percent. Thus, there is a slight tendency for males to have tougher temperaments and for females to be more compliant, but it can be, and often is, reversed.

3. The birth order has nothing to do with being strong-willed or compliant. These elements of temperament are basically inherited and can occur in the eldest or in the baby.

4. Most parents know they have an SWC very early. One-third can tell it at birth. Two-thirds know by the first birthday, and 92 percent are certain by the third birthday. Parents of compliant children know even earlier.

5. The temperaments of children tend to reflect those of their parents. Two strong-willed parents are more likely to produce tough-minded kids and vice versa.

6. Parents can expect a battle from SWCs in the teen years. Fully 74 percent of SWCs rebel significantly during adolescence.

7. Incredibly, only 3 percent of CCs experience severe rebellion in adolescence, and only 14 percent go into mild rebellion.

8. The best news for parents of SWCs is the rapid decrease in their rebellion in young adulthood. It drops almost immediately in the early 20s and then trails off from there.

9. The CC is much more likely to be a good student than the SWC. Nearly three times as many SWCs made Ds and Fs during the last two years of high school as did CCs. Approximately 80 percent of CCs were A and B students.

10. The CC is considerably better adjusted socially than the SWC.

11. The CC typically enjoys much higher self-esteem than the SWC. Only 19 percent of compliant teenagers either disliked themselves (17 percent) or felt extreme self-hatred (2 percent). Of the very strong-willed teenagers, however, 35 percent disliked themselves, and 8 percent experienced extreme self-hatred.

These findings yield a picture of the compliant child as being someone more at peace with himself or herself, as well as with parents, teachers and peers. The strong-willed child, by contrast, seems compelled from within to fuss, fight, test, question, resist and challenge.

Why is he or she like that? It is difficult to say, except to affirm that SWCs are more unsettled in every aspect of their lives. We do know that lower self-esteem is related to excessive peer dependency, academic difficulties, social problems and even rebellion. Acceptance of one's intrinsic worth is the core of the personality. When it is unsteady, everything else is affected.

Dr. Dobson's new Essentials of Discipline Home Edition DVD parenting seminar gives you the practical understanding, dynamic biblical principles and encouragement you need to shape your child's will without breaking his spirit. To request this resource, contact Focus on the Family at 800-A-FAMILY or visit