



Dr. James Dobson

*Q. Everyone tells me that children love justice and law and order. If that is true, why doesn't my young son respond better when I talk reasonably with him about his misbehavior? Why do I have to resort to some form of punishment to make him listen to me?*

A. There is a curious values system among children that respects strength when combined with love. What better explanation is there for the popularity of cartoon superheroes such as Superman? Why else do children proclaim, "My dad can beat up your dad"?

This respect for strength and courage also makes children want to know how tough their leaders are. They will occasionally disobey parental instructions for the precise purpose of testing the determination of those in charge.

The defiant game, called "Challenge the Chief," can be played with surprising skill by very young children. A father told me of taking his three-year-old daughter with him to a basketball game. The child, of course, was interested in everything in the gym. The father permitted her to roam free, but he set up limits for how far she could stray.

He had no sooner returned to his seat than the toddler stopped at the border, flashed a grin at her father, and deliberately placed one foot over the line as if to say, "Whatcha gonna do about it?" Virtually every parent has been asked the same question at one time or another.

The entire human race is afflicted with

this tendency toward willful defiance. God told Adam and Eve they could eat everything in the Garden of Eden except the forbidden fruit. Yet they challenged the authority of the Almighty by deliberately disobeying his commandment.

Perhaps this tendency toward self-will is the essence of "original sin." It explains why I place such stress on the proper response to willful disobedience during childhood, for that rebellion can plant the seeds of personal disaster that may grow into a tangled briar patch during the troubled days of adolescence.

When parents refuse to respond to their child's defiant challenge, something changes in the relationship. The youngster begins to look at his parents with disrespect. More important, he wonders why they would let him do such harmful things if they really loved him. 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.

## READER ALERT

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