

Talking about Talking Back

Ages 5-10

When children talk back, this can trigger a very emotional reaction in adults. After the shock and surprise, you may be thinking: Who taught you to talk like that? You will respect me! Who do you think you are?

As you may have already learned, reacting emotionally to back talk only escalates the behavior; however, when you remain calm, your children mirror your behavior. Your goal is to discourage the negative behavior of talking back, while encouraging children to talk about their feelings. Like most childhood behavior, when you understand and expect it, you can use the opportunity to model constructive behavior.

It may be hard to believe, but talking back is a very normal developmental milestone. When children talk back, they are trying to separate themselves from their parents and feel some control over their lives. Children must do this in order to grow into independent individuals.

Anticipating Back Talk

The next time your child talks back, pay attention to the situation. Is your child tired, hungry, or upset about other things? Is there a pattern? When the time is right, talk to your child about these patterns. You might agree that when your child is tired or hungry, you will both wait until these problems are solved before discussing other matters.

When you are tired or upset that things didn't go your way, model ways to act. You could say, "I'm so mad right now! I'm going to take a bath to calm down." This will show your child that it is acceptable to be mad; at the same time, you are taking responsibility for your emotional state.

Help your child develop more socially acceptable ways of expression by setting clear limits and explaining the behavior that you expect. Set ground rules for making a point and allow your child express a differing opinion, as long as it is communicated respectfully.

Dealing with Back Talk

Remember that your goal is not to win an argument, but to change your child's behavior. Tell your child that talking about things is great, but back talk is not acceptable. When your child talks back, tell him to find another way to say it, and you will listen.

Here are some tips you can try to deal with back talk.

- **Stay calm.** Don't overreact. This will escalate the situation, and you will miss an opportunity to teach your child how to express emotions and ideas constructively.
- **Model respect.** Children watch you more than they listen to you. Show them how to act and how to speak respectfully. Avoid sarcasm, belittling, or anger.
- **Encourage conversation.** Tell your child, "when you are calm, I will talk to you." Let your child tell you when he is calm and ready speak to you constructively.
- **Don't engage.** It is impossible for a child to argue if you are not participating!
- **Be honest.** You can tell your child, "That's not a nice thing to say." This encourages your child to think about how his or her words affect people.
- **Be firm.** Make your point once and expect good things. Walk away with the expectation that your child will comply.

If you let it, back talk will be a major problem in your household. When you set clear boundaries and limits while remaining calm, children learn to communicate in ways that are effective. With a little patience and understanding, you are helping your child develop independence and appropriate self-assertion. With your help, your child will move through this developmental milestone and become a confident person who can speak respectfully.