



Back Talk Summary

Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is normal. “Back talk” can be defined as children/teens responding with hurtful tones or words. Children/teens are trying to regain some power, so they lash out with hurtful words. Building your child’s/teen’s skills to respond to conflict in assertive but non-aggressive ways helps them gain power in healthy ways and is essential to their success.

Step 1. Get Your Child/Teen Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- *“What gets you really upset or mad at a friend, a relative, Mom and Dad?”*
- *“Apart from anger, what else do you feel in these situations?” (Name the multiple feelings that occur.)*
- *“What are some common ways you respond when you are upset or mad? What do you think the impact has been on other people when you respond that way?”*
- *“What is the difference between intention and impact?”*
- *“What are some ways you can respond when you are upset or mad that don’t have a negative impact on others?”*

Discuss challenges. In Step 2, plan to teach what they can do instead.

Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Reflect on how you currently model communication when you’re upset. Only model what you want to see and hear back from your child/teen.
- Do not use the following:
 - Do not use physical force.
 - Do not talk about family members negatively when they are not present.
 - Do not criticize.
 - Do not show contempt.
 - Do not become defensive or blaming.
 - Do not stonewall, refuse to listen, or give the silent treatment.
- Learn to use “I-messages.” *“I feel _____ (insert feeling word) when you _____ (name the words/actions that upset you) because _____.”*

Tip Be certain and pick a time to do this when you do not have time pressures.

Tip If your child/teen struggles to give you a feeling word, then offer them options and ask which ones fit their true emotions. This helps expand their emotional vocabulary.

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills, Confidence, and Develop Habits

- Allow your child/teen the chance to assert their needs in small ways like ordering for themselves in a restaurant or asking for your attention in healthy ways.
- Offer coaching or guided open-ended questions to prompt thinking so that they learn to become their own best problem solver.
- Share a range of feeling words regularly to become more comfortable with expressing feelings.
- On days with extra challenges when you can see your child/teen is frustrated or feeling irritable, proactively remind your child/teen of their strength. You can say, *“I know it doesn’t feel like this right now, but I so appreciate how you rise to the occasion even when it is hard.”*
- Practice deep breathing to help calm down when you have spare moments together - waiting in line, driving in the car, and at bedtime.

Tip The best way to turnaround a misbehavior is by recognizing when and how your child/teen makes good choices and acts positively in similar circumstances. Children/teens need to learn what to do as well as what not to do.

Trap Don’t move on or nag. Children/Teens often need more time to deal with their feelings and approach someone with whom they are upset. Be sure to wait long enough for your child/teen to show you they can address their problems on their own with your support. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they are able to work through their problems.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child’s/Teen’s Development and Success

- Initially, your child/teen may need active support to be able to pause in the moment. Use *“Let’s both pause for a moment, so our brains can catch up with our emotions.”*
- Remind them of their strengths: *“Remember how you talked to your sister yesterday? You can use that same strategy with your friend today.”*
- Stay engaged. Ask yourself if you need to reteach an idea or to make changes.
- Actively reflect on how your child/teen is feeling when approaching challenges. You can ask questions like *“I can tell you are still hurt about what happened with your friend. What do you think you might do?”* Be sure to reflect on outcomes of possible choices.
- Follow through on logical consequences to repair harm when needed.

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Notice even small successes: *“I noticed how you talked to your sister about how you were feeling and then worked with her on a way to come to an agreement. That’s excellent!”*
- Recognize small steps along the way.

- Build celebrations into your routine. Include hugs, high fives, and fist bumps in your repertoire of ways to appreciate one another.

Trap Avoid gifts or other physical rewards for performance. These actually have a de-motivating effect on children/teens. When you remove the extra screen time, for example, have they internalized the skills and the sense of responsibility for performing them? There's less of a chance if you've offered a "bribe." Focus on your attention as the best reward.

Tip Be specific. "Good job" seems not to carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior - "*You talked with your brother until you both could agree; love seeing that!*" - can promote more of the same.

Trap If you focus only on outcomes - "*You didn't argue at all*" - you miss the chance to influence the process. Better to say - "*You were arguing in the car, you both calmed down, and then, you talked it through.*"

Celebrate yourself for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your child's/teen's success today and in their future!

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