



Back Talk Summary

Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is normal. “Back talk” can be defined as children responding with hurtful tones or words. Children are trying to regain some power, so they lash out with hurtful words. Building your child’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 Thinking by Getting Their Input

- *“What gets you really upset or mad at a friend, a relative, Mom and Dad?”*
- *“How does your body feel when you’re upset?”* (Name the ways that your child physically experiences being upset.)
- *“Have you hurt another person’s feelings when you’ve argued? How did that feel?”*
- *“How might you have argued differently to express your needs but not harm the other person?”*

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.
- 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.
- Play like a hermit crab to help calm down. Pretend to bury yourself in your shell with your child, arms over your head, when upset. Take some deep breaths together and only reemerge when feeling better.

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

Tip If children struggle giving 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 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 your child learns to become their own best problem solver.
- Share a range of feeling words regularly to become more comfortable with expressing feelings.
- Practice the hermit crab game on more challenging problems. Then, when in a heated moment, gently remind your child, *“Remember what the hermit crab does?”*
- 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 makes good choices and acts positively in similar circumstances. Children need to learn what to do as well as what not to do.

Trap Don't move on or nag. Children often need more time to perform tasks that challenge them even if we believe they are simple and don't require much time. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they are competent. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they are able to do what you need them to do.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Use “Show me...” statements like *“Show me you can go into your shell and calm down before we talk this through.”*
- 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.
- Reflect on choices: *“Seems like you are holding onto angry feelings toward your friend. What are some ways you could approach her? What options do you have?”*
- Follow through on logical consequences to repair harm done 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. Consider a hug when the routine is accomplished.

Trap Avoid stickers, gifts, or other physical rewards for performance. These actually have a demotivating effect on children. When you remove the candy, 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 success today and in their future!

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2019). *Back Talk Summary. Ages 5-10*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.