



Back Talk Summary

Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is normal and expected. “Back talk” can be defined as “argumentative replies.”¹ Children/teens can respond in anger, hurt, frustration, in hurtful tones, or with hurtful words. But, “back talk” also represents a power imbalance children/teens are trying to rectify. Power, after all, is a basic human need. Building your child’s/teen’s skills to respond in assertive but non-aggressive ways is essential to their success.

Tip These steps are done best when you and your child/teen are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and actively building a healthy parenting relationship will support these steps.

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

- *“What are some situations that make you mad or really upset?”*
- *“Besides anger, what else do you feel in these situations?”* (Name the multiple feelings that occur.)
- *“What do you notice about what’s going on in your body?”* (Name the ways that your child/teen physically experiences being upset whether it’s a red hot face or a racing heartbeat.)
- *“What are some common ways you respond when you are upset or mad? What do you think the impact is on other people when you respond that way?”*
- *“What are some ways you can respond when you are upset or mad that don’t have a negative impact on others?”*
- Use your best listening skills! Listen closely to what is most concerning to your child/teen without projecting your own thoughts, concerns, and feelings.

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

- Reflect on how you currently model communication when you’re upset.
- Any actions, words, or tones of voice you use with your child/teen will be repeated and mimicked back to you by them. Ask yourself, “If my child/teen repeats back to me what I say when I am angry and in my tone of voice, will it be acceptable to me at home? In public?”
- Fighting habits hurt others and destroy trust in one another.²
 - Do not use physical force.
 - Do not talk about others 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 If your child/teen struggles to give you a feeling word, then offer them options and ask which ones fit their true feelings. This helps expand their feelings vocabulary.

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

- Allow your child/teen the chance to assert their needs in small and bigger ways like ordering for themselves in a restaurant or encouraging them to discuss a grade or problem with their teacher.
- 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.
- Practice “I-messages” on more challenging problems and with a range of issues including friendship conflicts. Then, when in a heated moment, gently remind them, *“What might an I-message sound like right now?”*
- Practice deep breathing to help calm down when you have spare moments together -- waiting in line, driving in the car, and at bedtime.

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.”*
- Make some agreements and be clear about your expectations. *“I want to make sure we both are clear about how we are agreeing to have this conversation. We are both committing to... and to not...”*
- Recognize effort by using “I notice...” statements like, *“I noticed how you listened to what I had to say without interrupting -- I so appreciate that!”*
- 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.”*
- 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.

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

- Notice even small successes: *“I noticed you paused before responding. Great work staying in control!”*
- 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.

References

1. Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/back%20talk> on 11/29/18.

2. Miller, J.S. [Fighting Fair Family Pledge](#) (research synthesis). Confident Parents, Confident Kids.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2020). *Back Talk Summary. Ages 11-14*. Retrieved from <https://www.ParentingMontana.org>.