



Back Talk Summary

Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is normal and expected. “Back talk” can be defined as teens responding in anger, hurt, or frustration using hurtful tones or with hurtful words. But, “back talk” also represents a power imbalance teens are trying to rectify. Power, after all, is a basic human need. Building your 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 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 Teen Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- *“What makes you really upset or mad at a friend, a relative, Mom and Dad?”*
- *“What feelings do you experience?”* (Name the multiple feelings that occur.)
- *“How does your body feel when you’re upset?”* (Name the ways that your teen physically experiences being upset whether it’s a red hot face or a racing heartbeat.)
- *“Have you hurt another person’s feelings when you’ve argued? How did that feel?”*
- *“What is the difference between intention and impact?”*
- *“How might you have argued differently to express your needs but not harm the other person?”*
- Use your best listening skills! Remember, what makes a parent angry or frustrated can differ greatly from what angers or frustrates a teen. Listen closely to what is most concerning to your 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. Only model what you want to see and hear back from your teen. Ask yourself, “If my teen repeats back to me what I say and in my tone of voice, will it be acceptable at home? In public?”

- Fighting habits hurt others and destroy trust in one another:¹
 - 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 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 teen the chance to assert their needs in small and bigger ways like speaking up at the store when there’s a problem or encouraging them to discuss a grade or problem with their teacher.
- Offer coaching or guided open-ended questions to prompt thinking so that your teen learns 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: *“Remember, it could help to use an I-message.”*
- Practice deep breathing to help calm down when you have spare moments together like while waiting in line, driving in the car, and at bedtime.

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

- Initially, your teen may need active support. Use, “Show me...” statements like, *“Show me that we can disagree without any hurtful statements toward one another.”*
- Recognize effort by using “I notice...” statements like, *“I noticed how you approached me when you were upset with your feelings and needs. It worked, didn’t it? That’s excellent!”*
- Remind them of their strengths: *“Remember how you talked to me yesterday? You can use that same strategy with your friend today.”*
- Actively reflect on how your teen is feeling when approaching challenges. You can ask questions like, *“Seems like you are holding onto angry feelings toward your friend. Have you talked to him yet? What options do you think you have?”* 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. 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 them 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 told me your feelings when you were upset. That’s exactly how we can work together.”*
- 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. Miller, J.S. [Fighting Fair Family Pledge](#) (research synthesis). Confident Parents, Confident Kids.

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