



# Back Talk Summary

## Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is normal and expected. “Back talk” can be defined as “argumentative replies.”<sup>1</sup> Children can respond in anger, hurt, frustration, hurtful tones, or with hurtful words. “Back talk” also represents a power imbalance children are trying to rectify. In order to regain some power, children lash out with hurtful words. Power, after all, is a basic human need. Building your child’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 are not tired or in a rush.

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

## 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?”*
- *“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 child 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?”*
- *“How might you have argued differently to express your needs but not harm the other person?”*
- Practicing naming feelings will enable your child to identify their own feelings as well as others and seek support when they need it. This can help your child gain competence.
- Use your best listening skills!

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.
- Fighting habits hurt others and destroy trust in one another:<sup>2</sup>
  - 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.

- 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.
- Begin to teach your child to repair harm. A critical step in teaching children about managing anger is learning how to repair harm when they've caused it.

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

### Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills 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.
- Consider how you can create the conditions to support their success (like offering 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 like while waiting in line, driving in the car, and at bedtime.
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support in following through to repair it.

### 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."*
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like, *"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!"*
- Remind them of their strengths: *"Remember how you talked to your sister yesterday? You can use that same strategy with your friend today."*
- Reflect on choices: *"Seems like you are holding onto angry feelings toward your friend. What are some ways you could approach your friend? What options do you think you have?"*
- Follow through on logical consequences to repair harm done when needed.

**Trap** Don't move on or nag. Children 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 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. Consider a hug when the routine is accomplished.

## 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.

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