

Strategies for Handling 'Back Talk'

By Jordan Sim, School Psychologist

Back talk: It stings, it shocks, it embarrasses, and it can turn your home into a battleground. Yet, with a little understanding and self-restraint, parents can put a lid on talking back.

Experts propose that the reasons for back talk are as varied as the personalities of the children who use it. The child could be hungry, tired, or just plain 'testing the waters' to see what you will do. But children who talk back usually do have one thing in common: They're trying to separate from their parents and exercise control over their lives.

How should you handle these outbursts? Before trying the strategies below, it's good to do some behavior tracking. For instance, over the next three days, make notes about what your child says, what the situation was, and how you responded. See if you notice any patterns.

Fight Fair

You won't ever be able to avoid disagreements with your kids, but you can learn how to 'fight fair'. The following six items serve as guidelines to follow when in a disagreement with a family member: a) don't attack, b) don't belittle, c) don't condemn, d) define what the problem is, e) define how to rectify it, and f) figure out what can be done to prevent it in the future.

Common back talk: "No!" and "Why?"

Strategies for responding: Model good behavior. Try saying, "Wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to do things we don't like to do?" Don't yell back and don't be sarcastic. Your response is going to determine what happens next. Parents will never be able to control their children. The only person you can control is yourself. When you model control, you teach kids how to control themselves.

Common back talk: "You don't understand!" and "It's not fair!"

Strategies for responding: Elementary-aged children are beginning to care more about what their peers think than what you think. They'll try to dangle bait to get you going. Don't bite! You'll lose: school-age kids always need to have the last word. Instead, let the child own the problem and empathize with him or her. Try saying, "You don't think I know what's going on with you right now and that's frustrating, but you're being disrespectful. Please go to your room until you've calmed down and can talk rationally with me."

Being proactive helps keep on top of the "It's not fair." Limits help kids develop inner control. Set limits for when you think your kids will be ready to cross the street safely, stay up later, go on a date, etc. Then try saying, "You know that in our house the rule is _____."

Common back talk: "Leave me alone!" and "It's all your fault!"

Strategies for responding: Teenagers can feel they're invulnerable to the consequences of poor choices or poor choice of words. If they say they want to be left alone, back off but don't give up. Take a more subtle approach. Write them a note without attacking or blaming, and say that you'd like to hear back from them. Always keep the dialogue open and help them to see you are on their side. Try talking in a lower voice. If you model screaming and shouting, that's what you'll get in return. And remember, you are always in charge in your house; you can set limits. As parents, you cannot be friends with your children, but you can still treat them in a friendly way.