

# ATTITUDES AND BACK TALK

Back talk, smarting off, and being fresh are disrespectful because they do not recognize the power structure of the family. The child is either treating parents as subordinates by giving orders or as peers by criticizing, using sarcasm, swearing, name calling, or not complying. Although it is important to consider children's ideas, when parents do not "carry the weight in the family," it is like sailing a boat with no ballast—the boat will capsize!

## WHY CHILDREN TALK BACK

Understanding the following sources of disrespect can help parents take it less personally and free their minds to have a quick-witted response:

- Young children talk back to test the limits of their power by ordering and verbally refusing to comply. High-energy children are especially prone to back talk because their exuberance gives them a confusing sense of strength.
- Adolescents talk back as a part of their struggle to establish their own identity and independence. They are critical of parents about almost everything—being too strict, too overprotective, old fashioned, or "clueless."
- Children of all ages will talk back when parents engage in power struggles with them.
- Comments that parents make out of hurt and anger can provoke disrespectful retorts from children.
- Children who are being empowered by another adult who is undermining the parent's authority will talk back.
- Children who feel too powerful because parents don't take action to establish their authority or too powerless because parents are overbearing will talk back.
- Children who have not learned respectful ways to disagree or express anger will talk back. This includes almost all children.

## HOW TO RESPOND TO BACK TALK

Telling a child not to talk back or to be more respectful will inspire the opposite. Psychologists usually advise parents to be consistent. In the case of back talk, it is important for parents to use a variety of responses. Surprisingly, the gentlest responses often produce better results than intense ones. Consequences will be more powerful when they are not overused. The following suggest levels of responding to back talk:

1. Label what the child is feeling without making any judgment. Fight back talk with feedback. This increases children's awareness of what they are doing without triggering a power struggle—"You really like to give me orders" (use with 6 below). "You seem quite disappointed in me." "You're frustrated with the way I worry."<sup>1</sup>
2. Sympathize to defuse anger—"It's really hard being 3 years old and having to learn so many rules." "It's very frustrating to lose that taste of freedom."
3. Being playful can increase awareness and break tension. Excuse yourself to get your broomstick if your child is treating you like the Wicked Witch of the West. Ask "Do I get demerits for that?" "How many IQ points do you think I've lost?" "Am I a completely hopeless worrywart or am I trainable?"
4. Match the child's attitude and back talk for him or her in your sassiest voice.

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<sup>1</sup> Several books elaborate on skills that improve communication with children: *Between Parent and Child* and *Between Parent and Teenager* by Haim Ginott (Avon 1969, 1971) and *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish (Avon, 1980).

5. Model appropriate ways to disagree or express anger. Talking as though you are the child, say “Mom, I disagree with your decision. Are you willing to hear my idea?”
6. Never take orders. Let children know that you cannot help them when they talk disrespectfully. Do not argue with verbal noncompliance. Simply withhold privileges until a task is complete.
7. Postpone discussions until you are calm enough to listen and until your child has more composure. Encourage your child (and yourself) to talk to a friend, write, or engage in some activity that will help you each be more objective.
8. Swearing can be handled like back talk and other disrespectful language. Focus on acceptable expression of feelings instead of punishment. If you are comfortable with it, allow children to use the “rhyming method” of creating swearing substitutes to use during emotional moments—“Oh sam-it! I had a mitty day.”
9. Withhold privileges until children can restate their previous comments with desirable words and tone of voice, demonstrate understanding of your point of view, or talk about what is really bothering them.

Technically, back talk is an act of omission because children are failing to talk in a desirable manner. They can easily be motivated to communicate more effectively if you give them time to collect themselves and withhold key privileges until they can perform the task in number 9 above. Putting a child on restriction for back talk is like trying to kill a mosquito with a machete and does little to teach desirable expression.

### **THE SILENT TREATMENT**

Some children prefer pouting, withdrawing, or “the silent treatment” to back talk. Simply require such children to tell you or write you a letter about what is bothering them before they can use the phone, eat snacks, or have other privileges. If you do this, you must be willing to feedback their feelings and sympathize with their viewpoint (although you may not change your position). If you attempt to dispute feelings, the approach will not work and the negative attitude will continue!