

Dealing with Disrespect

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Back talk--when your teenager rudely tells you that you are a tyrant or an idiot--has to be one of the hardest things for parents to deal with. Respect for parents is highly valued in every culture. Ways of showing respect differ from family to family. Some require prompt obedience without any protest; others are more relaxed. But disrespectful behavior is a tough challenge regardless of the specific form it takes.

As with other dilemmas of raising teens, there are no magic prescriptions to cure back talk, but some ways of dealing with it are more helpful than others.

- **First, calm yourself.** The natural response to back talk is anger. You might notice that your pulse has picked up and the muscles in your face, hands, and chest have tightened. Your body is preparing to fight, but fighting with a mouthy teenager usually just makes matter worse; both of you are likely to end up resentful and exhausted. Instead of lashing out, take a moment or two to calm yourself down. Take three deep, relaxing breaths and notice how your shoulders soften as you exhale. Now you are ready to respond effectively.
- **Give clear feedback.** Let your teen know what he has done and how it makes you feel. Try to be specific, and keep your comments simple. For example, you might say, "When you use that tone of voice with me, it makes me angry." For maximum effect, speak quietly but clearly and look your child squarely in the eye. This sort of response does several good things: It lets your child know precisely what he did that was unacceptable; it lets him know that he does not have the power to shake your self-control; and it teaches him to use words to communicate emotions like anger, rather than acting out the emotions.
- **Refocus on your goal.** One of the reasons teens talk back is that it diverts their parents' attention from whatever it was the parents wanted in the first place. Let's say, for example, that you've just told your child that he needs to remove the dirty dishes from his bedroom. If he succeeds in engaging you in a shouting match, chances are he won't have to deal with the mess in his room, at least for a while. Part of your response to back talk, then, should be to repeat whatever it was you said in the first place. "I know it makes you mad, but you still need to clean up your room."
- **Resist the temptation to retaliate.** When a child talks back, it's natural to want to put him in his place. Often this involves words like "spoiled brat," "ungrateful," "smart mouth," and so on. None of these is helpful. All name-calling does is deepen your child's resentment and allow him to feel justified in calling *you* names.

- **Try to hear your child.** Even though your teen chooses to respond in an obnoxious fashion, what he has to say might actually have some merit. In any case, it's helpful for you as a parent to know how your child feels about things, even if that's not always positive. For example, imagine that your teenager has just called you something completely unacceptable (and unprintable!). Once you've calmed down and given him feedback, you might reflect his statement back, using more civilized terms: "So, you feel that I am mean and unreasonable? Why, exactly, is that?" You have taken a confrontation and made it into a conversation. You've also shown your child that you are willing to consider his point of view, as long as he expresses it appropriately.
- **When it's over, it's over.** Back talk can be upsetting, and it's easy to let the upset linger. You may think that reminding your child that he has been disrespectful will help him to act more appropriately in the future. It won't. A more helpful response is to just get on with life and focus on positive things you and your teenager can enjoy together (not always an easy task!). Punishments for back talk are usually not necessary, and it may be wise to save punishments like grounding or removal of privileges for more serious offenses. Once teens see that back talk is unnecessary and not helpful, they tend to use it less and less.

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