Tools for Your Child's Success.org

Back Talk Age 17 Summary

Why Back Talk?

Arguing in family life is typical and expected. “Back talk” can be defined as teens responding in anger, hurt, or frustration using hurtful tones or 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 a healthy parenting relationship will support these steps.



- *“What makes you 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 how 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 significantly from what angers or frustrates a teen. Listen closely to what concerns your teen most without projecting your thoughts, concerns, and feelings.



- 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 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 finds it difficult to give you a feeling word, offer them options and ask which ones fit their true feelings. This will help expand their feelings vocabulary.



- Allow your teen to assert their needs in small and more significant 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 your teen learns to become their best problem solver.
- Share a range of feeling words regularly to become more comfortable expressing feelings.
- Practice "I-messages" on more challenging problems and various 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 you calm down when you have spare moments together, such as while waiting in line, driving in the car, or at bedtime.



- Initially, your teen may need active support. Use "Show me…" statements like, *"Show me that we can disagree without hurtful statements toward one another."*
- Recognize effort 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, *"It seems 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 the outcomes of possible choices.
- Follow through on logical consequences to repair harm when needed.

Trap: Don't constantly repeat yourself. 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 independently with your support. Your waiting could make the difference in whether they can work through their problems.



Recognize Efforts

- 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 and fist bumps in your repertoire of ways to appreciate one another.

References

1. Miller, J.S. (2019) Fighting Fair Family Pledge (research synthesis). *Confident Parents, Confident Kids*. Retrieved from https://confidentparentsconfidentkids.org/parent-resources/fighting-fair-family-pledge/

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