

Back Talk: Responding to Kids' Disrespect



by Karen Stephens

At one time or another, every child tries to sass a parent or caregiver. There's no surer way to rile an adults' temper. We become indignant and flabbergasted. How could our once oh-so-lovable infant become so mouthy? How could our toddler, whom we love and provide for — and would protect to the death — become so ungrateful and lippy? Well, it's a predictable phase of childhood. Sometimes kids mimic older siblings, cousins, neighbors, or classmates who get by with being a smart aleck. And television and talk radio models plenty of sarcastic sparring that gets laughs at the expense of others. (Need I mention how Homer Simpson is treated by his kids?)

In my day, most adults used standard comebacks when kids got too big for their britches. Refrains echo from childhood, and even today influence responses to our own children. Do these sound familiar?: "Don't give me any of your lip." "Who asked for your two cents?" "When I want to know what you think, I'll ask." "Another word outta you buster, and . . ." "Children should be seen and not heard." "Knock it off, or else."

With their not-so-subtle threats of harm, those comments put fear into children, but not the ability to sort out, manage, and maturely express legitimate emotions. They didn't give children alternatives. And they didn't help kids deal with conflict constructively and respectfully.

Do parents have a right to complain about back-talk or name calling? You bet! Should parents roll over and put up with it? No way! But it's how we react to kids' back-talk that counts most. In fact, it can make all the difference in the world.

If we respond patiently and maturely to children's negative remarks, we will, by example, teach self control and self-respect.

If we respond to disrespect with violent behavior and thinly veiled threats, we teach aggression, not wiser, more productive communication. Threats teach kids to "go for the jugular." Empty threats fuel the escalation of run-of-the-mill power struggles that everyone should expect to occasionally encounter when raising kids.

If parents allow emotional battles to heat up to the point of boiling over, we can create lifetime scars for everyone. There are ways to teach children to be gentler, especially with those they love — even when they are their angriest. The sooner you stand up to back talk, the better. Some children engage in it as early as age 2 when the drive for self-reliance and autonomy becomes so strong. Others don't engage in it until their junior high or high school years. (And by the way, those years also involve developmental changes urging kids onto greater independence and individual identity.)

Regardless of age, at some point all children try out-defying parents, so it's good to be prepared to handle the mini-revolts. Praising positive behavior is the best starting point. Reinforce respectful dialogue by thanking children when they are respectful. Encourage kids' ethical behavior by saying, "This is important to you. Even though you're angry, thanks for approaching me in a respectful manner."

But at some point, kids will get "mouthy" and test your limits. So be prepared to respond to a child who attempts to name-call, talk back, yell, stomp around or use disrespectful non-verbal gestures. When children act in those ways, it takes great willpower to harness your own feelings of anger and indignation. But if you try using one (not all!) of these phrases in response to a child's outburst, you'll increase your chances for constructive dialogue.

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Gear matter-of-fact responses to children's age and the degree of disrespect you've been shown. If children don't adopt more respectful attitude and behavior after ONE response, enforce a respectful consequence relevant to the situation. Don't take continued disrespect.

By teaching children respectful communication, you'll assert your dignity. And by your role model, you'll teach children how to stand up for their own dignity as well. It's an important lesson; you're the best instructor to drive the point home.

Responses for Back-Talk

- I see you're upset; find another way to tell me so I'll want to listen.
- You may not throw your teddy bear at me when you're mad. Explain what's wrong.
- Tell me if you don't like your food. If you spit it out on the table again, you'll be finished with dinner.
- If you stick your tongue out again, you'll be in your room until my temper calms.
- If you're frustrated about something, explain it. Yelling at me only makes me mad.
- Kind words will get my attention faster than name calling.
- When you talk mean-spirited, I want to walk away and not listen at all.
- When you talk mean I get so angry I want to call you names, too. We'll settle things faster if we stick to the issue. Can we agree to do that?
- I treat you with respect; I expect the same in return. You may not call me names.
- I've made my decision. Back-talk won't make me change my mind.
- I won't listen to your yelling. Go to your room until you can control what you say.
- Calling me names in front of your grandparents embarrasses me. It doesn't make me want to give you what you want.
- You seem enraged; a better place to tell me is in the privacy of our car (home.)
- I won't discuss this if you call me names. I'll be in the garden when you cool down.
- Making a scene in front of your friends doesn't convince me that you're thinking clearly.
- Explain why you're so disappointed; talking mean makes matters worse.
- Using hurtful words doesn't make me want to cooperate. What's the real issue?
- If there's a problem, I'll help solve it when you treat me respectfully.
- I never hurt you on purpose; I'm wondering why you want to hurt me.
- Hurting my feelings won't get you what you want. It just makes me feel more stubborn.
- Find a way to talk that doesn't alienate me.
- I don't call you names; I don't expect it from you, either. Can we start again?
- What can we do to calm down and talk constructively? Can we talk over a soda?
- Give me reasons for your wishes; slamming your bedroom door doesn't convince me.
- When you talk like that, it doesn't build my confidence in your logic.
- I won't give into you just because you call me names. If you're angry, find a way to calm down. Would listening to music help?
- It offends me when you call me names; I want to yell back at you. Try another strategy.
- If you are trying to hurt my feelings, you have. Please be more respectful.
- If you want to discuss issues, not attack me, I'll talk. Let me know when you're ready.
- We're lashing out. Let's set a time when we can talk calmly. How's a half hour?
- Walking away from me when I'm talking doesn't help our discussion; it infuriates me.
- When you sneer I feel like I'm wasting my time; it doesn't convey maturity.
- Rolling your eyes isn't an effective way to argue. Use respectful words.
- Stomping your feet doesn't change my mind; I just question your self control.
- I have faith you can find a more constructive way to address this issue. I'll wait; let me know when you're ready.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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