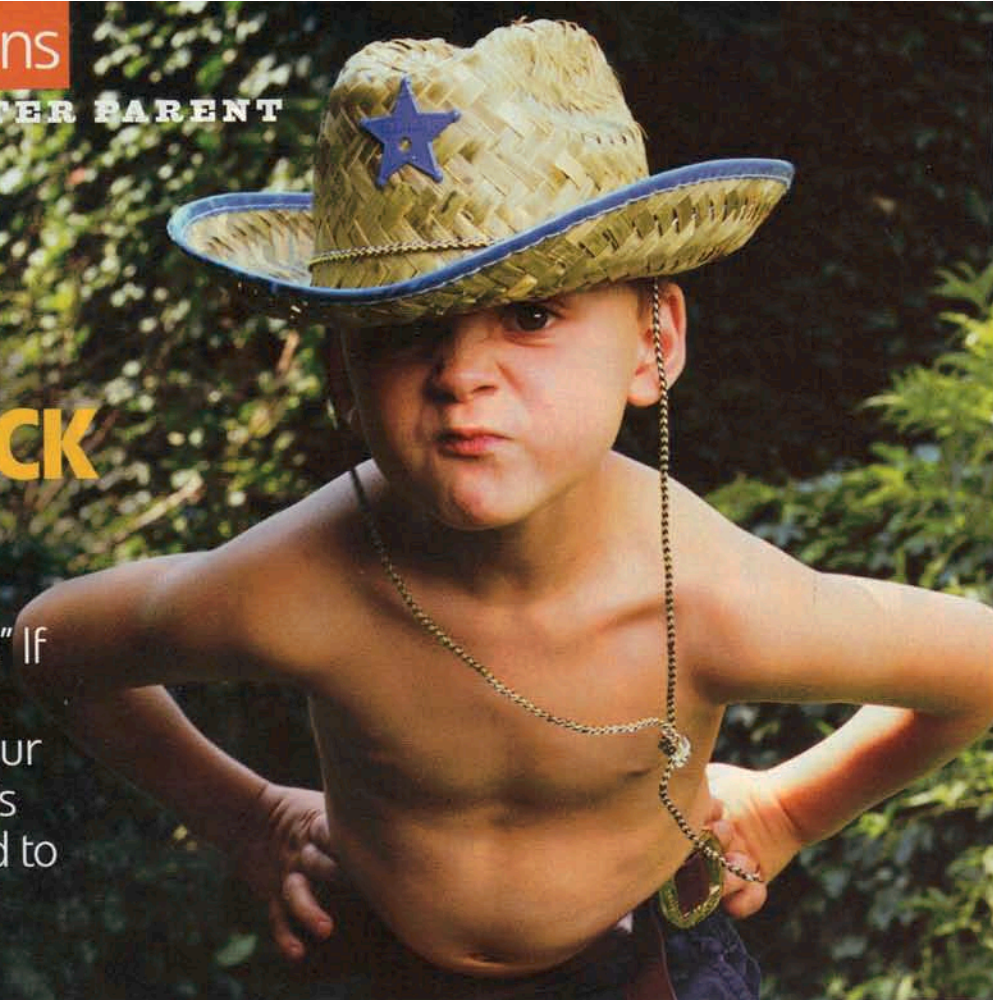


HOW TO STOP THAT BACK TALK!

"Why should I?"

"Try and make me!" If anything like this has come from your kid's mouth, here's how to put an end to it—for good.

by ellen wetty



We know it seems like just yesterday that your infant child was gazing up at you adoringly, as if to say, "I'd do anything for you, Mommy." Now that same child is walking and talking and—this is the unfortunate part—talking back. You ask your little guy to pick up his blocks and you hear, "Why should I?" You tell your daughter to put that second cookie back and you get, "You're not the boss of me," as she chomps into it.

Back talk is annoying, maddening, and sometimes even hurtful. But not to worry: We've got the goods on how to handle six common types of sass.

1 The Really Rude Remark

Your mother-in-law treats your 11-year-old to dinner out. When they return, she tells you that when she suggested that it would be polite of him to take off his baseball cap, he said, "What—are you my mother? Stop friggin' nagging me!" All righty. Once you've offered an abject apology to your mother-in-law, pay a visit to your son. Say, "I'm upset. I'm angry. Your disrespectful words really hurt your grandmother's feelings," suggests Elizabeth Pantley, author of *Hidden Messages: What Our Words and Actions Are Really Telling Our Children*. If he protests that he had a bad day, say, "I understand that it's hard to be polite when you're in a lousy mood. But it's not OK to speak rudely like that to her—ever."

Then insist he apologize immediately, even if you suspect his words won't be heartfelt. This teaches him "to take responsibility for his actions and shows him how to begin making amends," says Pantley. He may make the same kind of mistake

again, but apologizing each time drives the lesson home.

After Grandma leaves, talk with your child about how to respond when a grown-up besides you or his dad tries to tell him what to do. First say, "Honey, I don't want you blindly following other grown-ups' orders, so if someone tells you to do something that feels wrong, you can respectfully disagree." Explain that he could say, "Excuse me, but..." or "I'm sorry, but..." (as in, "I'm sorry, Coach, but I feel lousy and I'm going to stop running laps now"). Tell him too that if the problem is one of personal preference, to *politely* let the adult know ("Excuse me, Grandma, but Mom and Dad let me keep my cap on"). But suggest that he remove his cap next time, as a sign of love and respect for his grandmother.

2 The Defiant "Why?"

You sweetly say to your 7-year-old, "Time to go to bed," and she replies, "Why should I? I'm not even tired."

Ah, the bedtime battle—just what you need after a grueling day. If it's any consolation, mothers all across the land have similar showdowns with their kids about all sorts of seemingly routine matters. When my friend Dana told her 7-year-old that it was time to get in the tub, he said, "Why? I don't want one, I don't need one, and I'm not having one!"

To help defuse your kid's defiant attitude, empathize with her, says Steven C. Atkins, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Dartmouth Medical School and coauthor of *"Because I Said So!" Family Squabbles & How to Handle Them*. Say, "I know it's hard sometimes to go to bed," or, "It's tough to crack open the vocab workbook today, isn't it?" Then let her know, "But honey, you

need to do it." You can also stop the standoff by playfully saying, "How fast can you get to bed?" and then chasing her up the stairs. (Giving her a hug for cooperating won't hurt, either.)

3 The Valley-Girl Put-Down

After you tell your 5-year-old that it's rainy out and she'll need an umbrella, she rolls her eyes and says, "Duh! Hello, I know!" and walks away—a miniature teen nightmare.

Tell her: "The words you just used—'Duh, Hello, I know'—and the tone you said them in hurt people's feelings. The same goes for the way you rolled your eyes and walked away without giving me a chance to reply. Our family is not going to talk like that."

Your child's obnoxious act may increase for a few weeks while she tests you to see if you mean what you said, says Atkins. So set her straight, for instance, about any body language you find rude; it's hostile back talk just as much as "duh" is. Ditto for phrases like, "I know," uttered in that uppity tone. As Carrie, the mother of a 10-year-old, notes, "When I told my daughter that she really needed to wear a dress to a wedding—as opposed to Adidas track pants—her answer was, 'I don't *think* so.' It was the arrogance more than the words that got to me."

By the way, on days your child is "duh"-free, tell her you appreciate it, and that it's more fun talking to her now.

4 The Name-Caller

When you inform your 9-year-old that you're sorry, but she'll have to miss today's swim practice because you made a dental appointment for her, she blurts out, "You jerk! I have to go to swim practice!"

Nasty? Absolutely. Uncommon? Nope. My friend Beth has been called "idiot, jerk, stupid, and soooooo stupid" by Sam and Alexandra, her 9- and 12-year-olds. They resort to it when disappointed that Beth hasn't let them get their way (say, when she informs Alexandra that she won't drive her to the mall).

The moment your child hurls one of these decidedly uncharming names at you, says Pantley, say that you consider it disrespectful, and tell her to think of three more appropriate ways to express her displeasure. (Hopefully, the next time she's angry, one of them will pop into her head.)

But if that's not the case—if instead you hear, "You idiot! You have to take me to the mall!"—impose a consequence. Say, "I've asked you not to call me any disrespectful names." Explain that because she did, you're now not taking her to the mall. And let her know that if she uses any of those words with you again, you won't do whatever it is she wants from you at that moment.

Lastly, says Pantley, make a rule that she can't taunt her siblings or friends with any of those names. (Yes, that's a tall order, but give it a try.) The point is, if you consistently let her know that name-calling is unacceptable, she'll soon learn that back talk won't get her where she wants to go.

5 The Public Dare

While you and your 4-year-old are waiting for him to get a haircut, he repeatedly helps himself to candies from a bowl on the receptionist's desk. When you ask him not to take any more, he says, "Try and make me!"

To curb this blatant back talk, go over to him—having you right there shows him you mean business, says Barbara Coloroso, author of *Kids Are Worth It! Giving Your Child the Gift of Inner Discipline*. Resist the urge to assert your power over him ("I can too make you!"); you'll just get into a useless back-and-forth about it.

Instead, let him know he has reached his limit. Say, "Honey, this candy in your hand is your last one." It will mollify him if he feels that he's not entirely powerless, so let him choose whether to put this last candy in his pocket, give it to you to hold onto, or eat it. If he wails, again, give him some options: "You can calm down where you are or sit with me over by the magazines or choose another place in the waiting area here."

Know, too, that at the moment of his meltdown, your child probably won't absorb the social lesson, says Coloroso, so go over it again a little later, as in, "It's important to take just a couple of candies and leave the rest for other people."

6 The Flippant Friend


As you, your 8-year-old, and his friend are leaving for their soccer game, you spy the pal's sports bag by the door. When you point it out to him, he glances at it and says, "You get it," before walking outside.

No, you cannot drive away and leave this brat standing on your porch. So use this obligatory together-time to educate him about how to be polite, which will reinforce this same lesson in your kid's mind, says Coloroso. Just smile and say, "James, I'm happy to drive you to the game. That's my job. And you need to get your bag in the car."

Now, you may not feel like commenting on every single insolent remark from your kid's friends, but do address at least some of them. You'll model for your child not only politeness but backbone in the face of rudeness. □

why she's sassing you

Some back talk is just boundary pushing; at other times it means your child's truly upset. To know which is which, and how to respond, check out this guide, created with parenting expert Elizabeth Pantley.


 **Boundary-pushing barbs:** If your kid presses you repeatedly on one issue, even though she knows the rule about it, that's a clue that she's just testing your limits. Here's how to deal.

When your kid says: "You're not the boss of me!"

Say: "I'm your mother, and what I want you to do is ____."

When your kid says: "Yeah, right."

Say: "What I'd like to hear you say is, 'Yes, Mom.'"

 **Truly upset talk:** Besides using heated words, your sweetie may be on the verge of tears or otherwise showing intense emotion. If so, help her calm down before you address her back talk. Examples:

When your kid says: "You're the meanest mom ever! I won't ever do anything you ask me to!"

Say: "I know you're mad. I'll listen to you when you can use nicer words."

When your kid says: "It's not fair! I hate you!"

Say: "Saying the words 'I hate you' is not OK. I'm sorry that you think it's not fair."