

Kids and Arguing **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

How many times have you thought, “Boy, if I ever argued with my parents the way that my kids do to me, I probably wouldn’t be here today!” Well, if that’s a frequent occurrence in your home, believe me, you are not alone. Youth culture today, even with children as young as 2 or 3 years of age, seems to be sassier and perhaps more argumentative than in past generations. Why? Well, take into account that they are hearing and seeing some commercial-grade language and “attitude” on TV, on the playground and in the halls at school, and are also picking up on this stuff via older siblings. And, as our lives have become more hectic, perhaps we as parents have not taken the time to notice, respond to and tone down this rude behavior.

What’s a parent to do? Well, let’s first look at some of the most common back talk retorts rendered by our children.

First, there’s the old stand by, found in every house that I know of where kids are old enough to talk, “**That not fair!**” When my kids were growing up, it was the rare week or perhaps the rare day that I didn’t have to deal with that one. The only sane response, I’ve learned, is to agree with the kid. “It may not seem fair to you at this moment, I understand. But just because your brother is getting new sneakers and you’re not (because you don’t need them) is fair as far as I’m concerned. There will be other times that you get something or are allowed to get a privilege that he won’t—that’s just how our family works. Those who need something get it, and those who don’t, do not. End of discussion.”

Now, will Junior be happy with this explanation? Probably not, but if you repeat it every time that he begins an “its not fair whinathon”, eventually he’ll see that you’re sticking to your guns and arguing about it is only a waste of time.

Got a little one living in your house that’s a bit of a control freak and constantly argues about fulfilling your requests with, “**You can’t make me!**”? Those are especially fun kids—saying no to a request even before they’ve had time to process it. This is also known as “cutting off your nose to spite your face”—when just doing the requested action is no big deal, but it somehow symbolizes to the little guy that he’s in charge and needs to draw a line in the sand.

Correct parental response? First, keep calm—he’s just a little kid and you probably outweigh him and are smarter than he ever thought of being. Plus, you’re the Mom or Dad and what you say goes. Give him the request, “Jason, you have to put your Legos in the yellow bin. I’m setting the timer for 5 minutes. Any Legos left out will be thrown away—it’s your choice.” I’ve found that timers and “it’s your choice” are wonderful tools to use with ornery kids, especially little ones. The timer makes it black or white—the kid either cleans up the toys or pays the consequence (be it loss of the toys, a time-out, or losing a trip to the park planned for later that day). And, it’s Jason’s choice—children need to feel some control over their actions, and by giving him the clear

consequence (and you not freaking out and yelling, but calmly applying the consequence) soon he'll be making wiser choices. *Remember; never try to reason with the unreasonable.* Little kids are very self-absorbed and often unreasonable and to expect your child to see things your way (picking up toys at the end of the evening so that the next day starts out orderly) is probably not high on their agenda.

Now, how about the grade-schooler who all of a sudden wants to jump on trampolines (although you've restricted that in the past), play with toy weapons, ride his skateboard while holding on to the bumper of his buddy's Mom's car as they cruise the neighborhood? Sounds like your child has been hanging around Evil Kneival a bit too much. And, when you say "No" to these requests, he either does them anyway or hits you up with the age-old argument **"Everyone else gets to jump off the roof into their swimming pool. Why can't I? You treat me like such a baby!"**

Okay, after you've pulled yourself off of the floor, try to think of it from the kid's perspective—probably at least one child is doing as least one of these things, and your son feels like he's missing out on the fun by not being able to join in, or perhaps he is being made fun of for not participating. Discuss options with him, such as coming home when the play gets too rough or suggesting another activity. But, definitely tell him two things:

1. Not everyone is allowed to do this dangerous stuff, and in your mind perhaps the parents who do condone it are not aware of the harm that could occur.
2. And, you are his parent and you make the decisions that are in his best interest for health and safety.

No ifs, ands, or buts about it. No means no when it comes to engaging in dangerous activities. Draw the line in the sand and stick with it. The kid may not like you for a day or two, but that's okay—at least he's safe.

That brings us to another back-talk high on the hit list, the **"I'm so mad at you, I hate you!"** retort. First, tell your furious daughter that you understand her emotion, and that you'll be glad to further discuss the situation *later* when everyone has calmed down. But, let her know that you will not tolerate backtalk or rudeness from any of your children. Teach her to verbalize, or write down, her feelings explaining her side of the argument. Agree that you will re-consider her request or issue if she's polite in her approach, but that in no way guarantees that you will change your mind on the issue. The point is to let her know that you respect her feelings—mad, sad, happy, embarrassed, but that she is to present them in a civil fashion, not as an argument, or you will be less likely to listen to her message since you're so caught up in her rude tone of voice.

Trust me, these are only a few of the potentially rude back-talks that kids come up with as they grow from toddler hood to their teen years. It's normal, but very, very annoying. And, this argumentativeness will not go away until you make it very clear that you will not accept it, that there will be consequences (more on that later), and that you expect

civility in the house. **But, if you expect your children to be civil, so must you.** Watch out for how demanding or argumentative you are (rather than polite asking), the language that comes out of your mouth, and whether you show appreciation when the kids are compliant and responsible. It's a two-way street, and you are the role model for your children's behavior. Sure, they are picking up some nasty stuff from their peers, but they can learn what is acceptable and respectful for your own home by your actions and verbalizations.

Now that we've discussed the correct parental responses, let's talk about the correct parental actions. If just changing your verbal response to your children's backtalk doesn't change their behavior, you may have to play a little "hardball". That is, if your kids remain less than respectful, tend to argue at the drop of the hat, or always seem to have to get in the last word, how about making some changes right now in your family game plan?

Setting up a Behavioral Plan

To motivate children to not talk back and to do as requested a behavioral plan needs to be set in place. The program should be simple and convenient in order for you to carry it out, have some teeth to it so that it will be effective, and practical if you are going to be consistent. Over the years I've devised several types of systems ranging from the simplistic to the tediously complex, and I've found that it's a tradeoff of sorts. The more detailed and comprehensive the rules are for the kids, the better the system works. However, when Mom or Dad feels that the program takes too much time and attention they begin to slack off, and so do the children. Most parents end up with a balanced approach—focusing upon the most common back-talks and using the most convenient form of keeping track of arguing behavior.

All behavioral change systems designed for lessening kid arguing have three components. **First you need to set up a place to mark down demerits as they occur throughout the day.** A calendar with at least one-inch square boxes for each day works well, and you can denote each child's back-talk demerits by simply writing down the first letter of the first name. For instance, if Meghan has to get in the last word and is argumentative about an issue, writing an "M" on today's box on the calendar notes this. If she emits another talk-back, another "M" follows and the total can be counted as the day proceeds.

The next part of the behavioral program determines how many arguing demerits are permitted each day. The acceptable number of demerits depends upon how picky the parents are (and therefore how quickly demerits will be given) as well as how argumentative the kids are! It may be wise to start by allowing eight or nine talking-back demerits per day if your kids are fairly argumentative, and then lowering the acceptable number as the weeks go by. If your children are more accommodating, then you may want to start with permitting only four or five per day.

The final component of the program involves setting up reasonable and effective consequences. *Reasonable* means that you and your child can live with the *penalties* for

talking-back—if you’re not going to follow-through its better not to threaten in the first place. Taking the bike away for a year probably won’t happen, but you can most likely follow-through with this same consequence for a week or even a month. Also, the *rewards* that you offer must be within your means—don’t promise five dollars allowance per day unless you can afford that amount as well as believe it to be appropriate for your children to earn.

Effective means that the consequence is important to the child—it either really bothers the kid or has great positive significance to the child. I’ve found that kids dislike being bored more than just about anything else—so consider temporarily removing a privilege such as television, video games, computer usage or playtime. Time-out in a boring and safe spot can be effective for young children (teens love to hide-out in their bedrooms so time-out for adolescents is often less than effective). You can also use *effective incentives* for appropriate behavior that get your kids’ attention—whether it’s a daily allowance, clothing money or a later bedtime or curfew. Again—whether the consequence is positive (a reward or incentive) or negative (loss of privilege or time-out) it has to be *important to the child* in order to be effective. **And, the consequence does not have to be “natural”—that is, tied to the behavior. Sure, it’s great to remove the bike for a week when the child takes off on it without permission. But, many argument demerits are not easily associated with a “natural consequence.” I’ve found that it doesn’t really matter whether it’s “fitting” or not, as long as the consequence is effective and gets the kid’s attention.**

Be Consistent, Use Catastrophic Consequences and Be Clear

The three C’s—consistency, catastrophic consequences and clarity of rules are necessary in motivating children to change argumentative behavior. It’s not always easy for parents to pull off, but in the long run handing out demerits, taking away privileges for talking back behavior or providing incentives and rewards for cooperation is a more pleasant path to a peaceful home! Consider it your gift to yourself as well as to the kids!