

**H.O.P.E Newsletter – Issue 10**

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## **Backtalk: Should You Ignore It?**

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Does this sound familiar?

“Stop hitting your sister. If you don’t stop, you’ll have to go to your room.”

“You can’t tell me what to do!”

“I most certainly can! Now get to your room...or else.”

Backtalk can be terribly aggravating to parents, often evoking a strong emotional response. It feels hurtful and disrespectful, and we just want it to stop.

As parents, we all have our triggers: the things our kids do and say that set us off. And many of our triggers are related to backtalk and the shocking and hurtful things kids say when they’re angry. The child who says he hates you doesn’t really hate you, but is angry and uses this hurtful way to express it.

As long as your child is not being destructive, not threatening others, and actually following through on your direction, it's okay to ignore some backtalk.

So it's natural for us to respond emotionally to backtalk: screaming and yelling, bantering back and forth, using sarcasm, feeling victimized, or inconsistently ignoring or pouncing on our child for the same behavior. Sometimes we just give in to it. Other times we look to place blame elsewhere (e.g., she must have learned that from her cousin, or at school) and we don't put the responsibility where it belongs: on our child. These are all ineffective parenting responses, but easy to fall into when backtalk is involved. Later, we'll look at some more effective responses parents can use.

### To Ignore—or Not?

- **You *can* ignore backtalk when your child quietly talks back, yet is following through on what you asked.** If he stops hitting his sister and goes to his room, despite saying that you can't make him, he is doing what you wanted. His words, while angry, can be ignored (it helps if we remember that *feeling* angry is okay). As long as your child is not being destructive, not threatening others, and actually following through on your direction, it's okay to ignore some backtalk.
- **You should *not* ignore backtalk when your child is at risk of hurting herself or others, including threatening others.** It is not okay for you or others to feel intimidated by your child's backtalk. You will need to address this, although the middle of an angry outburst is not the time to have a discussion about the problem. As long as everyone is safe, *let it go during the angry phase*, but be sure to address it when your child is calm.

### Addressing Backtalk

In order to get a handle on the backtalk, we need to *focus on our child's behaviors instead of responding emotionally*. When we are able to do so, we become our children's limit setters, teachers, and coaches, promoting the kind of behavior that will make them successful in life.

*When things are calm, let your child know that you didn't like what he said and how he said it.*

- *If he did as you asked*, tell him you're happy about that, but still use this opportunity as a teaching moment. You don't need a long, heavy-duty conversation, but let him know that what he said was a problem and that while being angry is okay, saying angry things is not.
- *If, however, your child's anger and behaviors were more intense*, then you need to have a conversation about what is — and is not — acceptable behavior. Explain that there are consequences for unacceptable behavior, and be ready to follow-through on those consequences. Ask your child to talk or write about what made her so angry so you can both better understand. A younger child may need to draw a picture to show this.

When responding to backtalk, it's essential to use ***positive and effective parenting roles*** — and communication consistent with those roles — rather than responding emotionally. When doing so, you are modeling a more positive way to deal with anger and resolve conflict. For example:

- **The limit setter.** “I don't want you to talk like that to me. If it continues, I won't be able to take you to the movies this weekend.” You've been calm and clear about what the problem behavior is, how you expect it to change and what will happen if it doesn't.
- **The problem-solver.** “I know you were really angry at me and really wanted to watch the rest of the TV show before taking your shower. Rather than saying that there was no way you were taking a shower tonight, you could have just asked to wait 10 minutes to

finish the show. Things would have gone so much smoother for everyone.” You’ve let her know that while it’s okay to be angry, it’s not okay to be disrespectful.

- **The coach.** “You’ve been working on controlling the things you say when you’re angry. Your teacher reports that you’re doing so much better at school. Now, you need to work on this at home.” You’ve recognized and described the behavior that is improving, while offering support and direction for continued improvement.

### **When Backtalk Happens in Front of Others**

When backtalk happens in your home, there may be times when you want to remove other family members from the situation. Their presence is not likely to be helpful, especially if the backtalk is veering toward a full-blown tantrum. Getting your child away from others (e.g., in his room), or removing others from the immediate area will help him to calm down. It also lets him know that this type of talk is not acceptable to other people.

If your child talks back to you in public, you can respond similarly: reduce the onlookers. This may mean having to leave the area, but getting the child away from the public activity will give them some time and space to calm down and regroup, if necessary.

It’s hard in these situations; we feel so embarrassed by our child’s behavior and judged by others. Whether at home or in public, *it’s helpful to remember the three effective parenting roles* we discussed earlier. In a calm and business-like manner, set the limit, give a direction, and disconnect from any emotional response: “If you don’t stop talking to me like that, we will leave this store right now, and you won’t get those new jeans you wanted.” When your child is calm, reinforce what will happen if the behavior reoccurs, and be prepared to follow-through.

### **You Can Start to Change Your Response to Backtalk at Any Time**

Intervening more effectively with backtalk is something a parent can start to do at any time. Try to be as objective and honest as possible about the behavior—and your response to that behavior. What has worked in the past? What hasn’t worked? Do you have a trigger that brings out an emotional response? Where can you begin to change?

As you use more effective parenting responses, you will begin to shape your child’s behavior. That doesn’t mean that he will immediately thank you for responding differently and stop talking back to you! But with limits, teaching, and coaching, he will begin to find better ways of reacting to your directions or requests.

As you start setting limits, your child may push the limits further; just stick with it. Once your child realizes you mean business, and are willing to follow-through on the consequences, behavioral changes will occur over time. Change doesn’t happen overnight, but with gradual steps, there will be improved behavior and you’ll relate to each other better.