

Kids Who ‘Talk Back’ Become More Successful Adults



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“Kids talking back” is a perennial complaint in parenthood.

When your kid starts talking back or mouthing off, it pushes your buttons! Staying calm feels incredibly hard, even though you know — in theory — that a calm response is best for everyone involved (as well as your blood pressure).



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But what if — (and just go with me here for a moment) — when your kids push back, it is actually great for their development?

The experts agree, this behavior is actually developmentally healthy for [kids](#). Clinical psychologist [Kelly M. Flanagan](#) explains that “the inability to say “No” — the inability to set personal boundaries — is one of the most common, insidious causes of human suffering.”

Psychologist [Joseph P. Allen](#), who headed a study for the University of Virginia, says: “We tell parents to think of those arguments not as a nuisance but as a critical training ground.”

At its core, when kids push back at your authority, they’re trying to exert some sense of control over their own lives. They’re practicing that skill — flexing that muscle, if you will — with you.

Wouldn’t you rather your child learn to negotiate with you, first, than feel obliged to follow some other kid’s directions the first time a pushy peer says, “Come on, everyone’s doing it?” Or blindly follow the directions of an adult acting inappropriately toward your child?

Focus on HOW They Push Back

We’re ALL desperate for our kids to master the skills they need to stand up to peer pressure or danger when faced with difficult life decisions.

What if your ability to embrace (coach and help manage) your child’s burgeoning independence is the key to teaching those critical negotiation skills? Skills that enable your kids to say “No” to drugs and delay sexual experimentation until an appropriate age?

The truth is — it’s NOT whether they pushback that really speaks to your authority. They’re kids. They’re going to push back. That’s their job. Your authority lies in HOW they push back, and in HOW you respond to them.

Are you teaching your child to challenge you with respect? Are you setting expectations (and positive examples) for appropriate communication? Do you help

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them understand and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions?

Your children's ability to negotiate risky or adverse circumstances improves when you teach them to exercise control with self-awareness, respect, grace and calm.

Who's In Control, Anyway?

We want to feel good about ourselves as parents, and somehow a 2-year-old saying, "NO!", a 9-year-old saying, "Why do I have to?" or a 14-year-old saying, "You're not being fair" triggers insecurities about our competence as parents.

spoken to my parents that way:), and partially because we want to feel like we have some sense of control over our kids. Life is easier (in the short-term, when they just do what we say). But we don't ultimately have control over our kids. Not really.

Kids come into the world with a path of their own to follow. From a very early age they start teaching us this lesson, veritably screaming at us: "It's not about you; it's about me!"

Sadly, it usually takes us years to grasp the message — if we ever do.

What Your Child Wants You to Know

In different ways at different stages of development, the message is the same:

They are independent beings with their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas. They are on their own path. And while it's your privilege supervising them on their journey, their journey is still their own, not yours.

For kids to grow into healthy, independent adults, they need to practice making decisions for themselves, and negotiating for what they want — even if what they want seems absurd or unimportant to you. Because, it's not about you.

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If they can negotiate feeding the dog at 7:00 pm instead of 6:30 pm now, they're better prepared to negotiate with their college professors, with their manager at work, and with a spouse or partner at home in their future.

Remember ... You're Raising Future Adults

Parenting a child toward independence almost feels like a contradiction in terms. But when we remember that we're not raising children, we're raising future adults, it helps a lot.

So the next time you hear yourself say — “How dare you talk to me that way?” ... or, “Because I said so” ... or even, “I gave you a direction and I want you to do what I said” — think about the message you're sending, and ask yourself how you might empower your child, instead.

How can you maintain your authority, without needing to exert control?

For example, a simple response to ugly tones and language, try: “Do you have a different way to say that?”

Requesting that they finish a chore, but do so offering them a chance to decide when to do it: “I'd like the dishwasher unloaded before dinner and it's your turn today. What time would you like to do it, and would you like a reminder?”

Remember, this is a process, and it will take time to turn the ship. A few well-placed questions will not magically shift the relationship currently established. But a move in new, supportive, understanding direction is a powerful play towards fostering your child's independence — which is ultimately what parenting is all about. —*Elaine Taylor-Klaus & Diane Dempster*

(Photo: Corbis Images)

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