

When Kids Talk Back

Every parent knows that moment: the eye roll, the sigh, the sarcastic comment, or even outright refusal to do what you've asked. Whether your child is five or fifteen, backchat can leave you feeling frustrated, disrespected, and unsure of how to respond.

But what if I told you that backchat might actually be a sign of healthy development? An inconvenient and clumsy sign, perhaps. But a sign nonetheless. How so?

When children talk back, it often shows they feel safe enough to express disagreement with authority—including ours. This isn't rebellion for rebellion's sake; it's the stirring of critical thinking. They're developing their own sense of what's fair and reasonable, and they're brave enough to voice it, even when they know we might not like it.

The way we respond in those moments can either nurture their growing autonomy and problem-solving abilities... or teach them that challenging authority is dangerous and their perspectives don't matter.

Here's what parents need to know—and do—when kids backchat, from preschool through high school.

Why Kids Talk Back

Backchat is rarely out-and-out defiance. More often, it's a child's attempt to assert some control over their world when they feel powerless. When kids experience:

- Over-control (decisions imposed without their input)
- Overwhelm (expectations that feel impossible to meet)
- Disconnection (sensing their thoughts and feelings don't count)

...they're more likely to push back. And because they're still learning how to navigate complex social situations, it comes out in ways we don't like—as sass, sarcasm, or outright refusal.

What Parents Can Do

The goal isn't to silence your child's voice or demand unquestioning compliance, but to help them learn more effective ways to communicate their needs and concerns whilst maintaining connection. Here are three approaches:

1. Get Curious, Not Furious

Instead of meeting their attitude with your own authority ("*Don't you dare talk to me like that!*"), try genuine curiosity about their perspective.

Ask yourself: What's underneath this behaviour? What need are they trying to meet?

You might say, "*It sounds like you're really frustrated about this. Help me understand what's bothering you.*"

This invites collaboration rather than demanding submission.

2. Acknowledge Their Reality—Even When You Can't Change Everything

You don't have to agree with your child to validate their experience. Sometimes just being heard defuses the tension.

"I can see why that feels unfair to you." or "You wish you had more say in what happens in your day, don't you?"

This shows you're genuinely interested in their inner world—not just their compliance—even if certain expectations still need to be met.

3. Invite Problem-Solving Together

Rather than simply laying down the law, try collaborative problem-solving:

- *"This isn't working for either of us. What ideas do you have that might help?"*
- *"I need X to happen. You're telling me Y is important to you. How can we make this work for both of us?"*

If emotions are running high, suggest a pause:

- *"We're both pretty heated right now. Let's take a break and come back to this when we can really listen to each other."*

The Bigger Picture

We can't eliminate backchat entirely—nor should we want to. Children who never question authority often struggle to think critically or advocate for themselves later in life.

What we can do is help our children learn that their voice matters, while also developing the social skills to express themselves effectively. When we respond to backchat with curiosity rather than control, we're teaching them that it's safe to disagree, that problems can be solved together, and that relationships can handle conflict.

Your kids are learning from you every day how to handle disagreement and navigate power dynamics. The question isn't whether they'll encounter conflict in life—they will. The question is whether they'll have learned to handle it with respect, creativity, and connection.

****Quick Reminders for Parents:****

- Stay curious—their "attitude" often masks a legitimate concern
- Remember, they're practicing important life skills (even when it's inconvenient)
- Look for ways to share power where possible
- Model the respectful communication you want to see
- Focus on connection and problem-solving, not winning

For more tips and resources, visit happyfamilies.com.au.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.