SICK OF YOUR KID’S BACKTALK? HERE’S HOW TO STOP IT
by James Lehman, MSW (Behaviour Therapist)

As a parent, sometimes it seems like your day is filled with an endless stream of backtalk from your kids—you hear it when you ask them to do chores, when you tell them it’s time to stop watching TV, and when you lay down rules they don’t like. It’s one of the most frustrating and exhausting things that we deal with when we raise our kids.

Backtalk comes from a sense of powerlessness and frustration. People don’t like to feel powerless, and that includes children. So when kids are told “no” they feel like something’s been taken from them. They often feel compelled to fill that empty space with backtalk. I want to make the distinction here between backtalk and verbal abuse, because many times people confuse these two very different things. If your child has started saying hurtful or harmful things, the line between backtalk and verbal abuse has been crossed. For instance, if a child is cursing you, calling you names or threatening you, that’s verbal abuse. If your child is saying, “This isn’t fair, you don’t understand, you don’t love me,” that’s backtalk.

Verbal abuse is a very negative behaviour and has to be dealt with aggressively and up front. It’s not that backtalk is harmless, but it’s certainly not as hurtful and hostile and attacking as verbal abuse is.

Backtalk itself can take several forms. One is the kid who can’t keep quiet, no matter what you say: he or she has got to have the last word. And then there’s the child who wants you to understand their point after you’ve already said “no.” It’s easy for kids to get into the mindset of, “If I could just explain it better, you’d understand my situation.” So you’ll get kids who present their problem or request repeatedly in the hopes that their parents will give in and respond to it. If their parents don’t give them the answer they want, those kids will then try to re-explain, as if the parent doesn’t understand. Often, as they launch into their explanation for the third or fourth time, the child and the parent will both get more frustrated until it ends up in an argument or a shouting match.

Don’t Respond to Backtalk: You’ve already set the limit
Why do parents react to backtalk after they’ve already won the argument? I think parents often see it as their job to respond to their children: to teach, train and set limits on them. And backtalk is an invitation to do just that. Just as the child re-explains things to the parent if they’re told “no,” the parent “talks back” and re-explains things to their child. So the parent’s mindset seems to be, “If you really understood what I was saying, you wouldn’t talk back to me—you’d accept my answer.” Let me be clear here: That’s not a rational mindset. It leads parents into attending and prolonging arguments in which they don’t need to engage. Parents sometimes see backtalk as a challenge to their authority, but as long as you accomplish your objective, the fact is that your authority is fully intact.
Here's an example:

Your child: “Can I stay out until 10 tonight?”
You: “No, because you have to get up early tomorrow for soccer practice.”
Your child: “Who cares? I don’t need that much sleep.”

You should stop right there. Any conversation you engage in after that is meant to convince your child that you have sound judgment. Know this: that's the wrong objective because it addresses a completely different issue—whether or not you made a good decision. So once you give a reasonable explanation for the rule you’ve stated, your job is done. You can repeat it again if need be. You’ve already won the fight. But when you try to convince your child that you’re right and they continue to challenge you through backtalk, you’re just going to get more frustrated.

Your job as a parent is not to get your child to accept the reasonableness and rationality of your decisions. You just need them to follow the rules. Look at it this way: when a police officer stops you for speeding, he doesn’t care if you think that 108 km an hour is too slow. He just tells you what the law is. If you argue with him, he repeats what the law is. If you don’t accept it, he hands you your ticket and walks away. If you become verbally abusive, he arrests you. Try to think of yourself as the police officer here—you’re the parent making the rules, and your child needs to accept them or pay the consequences.

**Shutting Down Backtalk: The Plan**

In order to put a stop to backtalk, there are several things you have to do. First of all, when things are good, sit down with your child and lay down some ground rules. Discussions about these rules are critical to good communication and to cooperation down the road. I guarantee that you’ll feel better as a parent if you set up rules and follow them with your children. Your goal then becomes following the ground rules instead of trying to achieve your child’s acceptance. The first rule is, “I’ll explain something once and I’m not going to talk more after that. If you try to argue or debate, I’m going to walk away. If you follow me or if you continue there will be consequences.” You set limits on backtalk and you don’t give it power.

Another option is to set up a certain time of day in which your kid can talk back to you. You can say to them, “From 7-7:10 p.m., you can ask me to re-explain all my decisions. Save it for then. If you need to, write it down in a journal. Then at 7 o’clock, we’ll sit down and I’ll explain to you why you can’t date a 22 year old or how come you got grounded for smoking. But at 7:15, our discussion is done. If you try to keep it going there will be consequences.” That way, if you feel like you want to give your child an outlet to air his or her grievances, there’s a way to do it without getting bogged down in constant arguing.

Remember, there are two kinds of days that a kid has: there are good days and then there are days when things don’t go their way. Don’t try to fight the tide of disappointment that kids experience. They will use backtalk to get their way, but as a parent, you have to accept the fact that they will not always be happy with your decisions. Your job is to set the rules and enforce them because those roles are for your kid’s development and safety. Whether they like those rules or not, they have to learn to live with them.