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CHILD BEHAVIOR HELP

### ARTICLE

## HOW TO RESPOND TO DISRESPECTFUL CHILDREN AND TEENS

by Kim Abraham LMSW and Marney Studaker-Cordner LMSW



A child's disrespectful behavior can be a parent's greatest "button-pusher." A dad recently shared his frustration about his 14-year-old daughter's disrespect: "I told her she couldn't go to a party until her room was picked up – it's an absolute mess – and she just exploded. She yelled, told me she hated me and slammed her door. I was so angry and shocked; I told her she was never going to another party until she turned eighteen!" This dad isn't alone. Ask any parent and they're likely to have at least a few instances in which their child was disrespectful, rude or inconsiderate – even outright defiant. Sometimes disrespect comes along with adolescence; other times a child may show disrespectful behavior from an early age. Either way, it's a behavior that can push any parent's emotional

buttons!

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#### The Nature of Disrespect

As adults, we *expect* our children will respect us: our feelings, our home, our authority. And society expects children to be respectful. The phrase, "Children are to be seen, not heard," comes from a long-held belief that children should be compliant, quiet and do as their parents say. Yet anyone who's been around a child for more than an hour knows this often isn't the case. So how can we reconcile our expectation of respect with our child's need to test limits as they assert their independence? Just how far is *too far*?

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There are several reasons a child may behave in a way that is "disrespectful." First, he may not realize the behavior is disrespectful. For example, questioning a parent's decision may strike adults as rude, but to a child, it may simply be a way of getting his needs met: *I want to go to my friend's house. My mom said 'No. I want to figure out if there's any possible way I can change her mind, because I really want to go. So I question, I argue, I do anything I can think of as a way of getting her to say 'Yes.'*

That child is acting in the moment, focusing on getting what he wants, not really paying attention to the fact that his behavior is actually backfiring and digging him a bigger hole. Kids also have difficulty asserting or expressing themselves appropriately when feeling angry or frustrated. Adrenaline kicks in and eyes start rolling, voices raise, feet get stomped and doors get slammed. Ever find yourself saying, "Stop it right now, before you make things even worse for yourself!"?

Some kids have difficulty managing the stress and emotions they experience when faced with a limit or being told “no,” and just can’t keep themselves from crossing the line. Add in adolescence and hormones and you’ve got the potential for emotions and irritability to escalate quickly.

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Finally, in today’s world of television sitcom families, gone are the Beaver Cleaver families. Kids see disrespect and “talking back” modeled for them in the media all the time. In fact, most television shows send the message that the kids are usually smarter than the parents!

## Responding to Disrespect

Most parents face mild to moderate disrespectful behavior from their kids from time to time. But what's an effective way to respond?

1. **Decide which behaviors need to be addressed.** Most kids have engaged in mildly disrespectful behaviors, such as rolling their eyes at a parent, at least a few times in life. Sometimes it’s as they’re walking away; sometimes they do it before they realize, “Oops, mom’s still standing in front of me!” This is an example of a behavior that you may choose to “let go,” and instead focus on larger issues of disrespect (such as yelling, swearing, slamming doors, screaming “I hate you,” depending on your child’s age.) Who hasn’t heard Mom say, “If you keep making that face, it’ll freeze that way!” Sometimes it’s hard for a teen to hide their discontent – and honestly, isn’t it that way for all of us? On the other hand, if your daughter rolls her eyes at you every time you turn around, you may decide that enough is enough and this behavior warrants a conversation. As a parent, it’s a judgment call, but most parents agree there are times when you’ll want to “pick your battles.”
2. **Don’t take responsibility for your child’s disrespect.** One of the reasons a rude child is so upsetting to us is that we often feel it’s a reflection of our parenting. If you’re sitting around the Thanksgiving table with Uncle Bob and Grandma Jean and your son blurts out something rude or inconsiderate to you, it can trigger feelings of anger and embarrassment. “What kind of parent will other people think I am if my child is acting this way?” As hard as it is, remember: your child’s behavior is a reflection of him – not you.

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3. **Define for your child what disrespect is.** Talk to your child about which behavior is respectful and which isn’t. We often expect our kids to know things without spelling them out. Kids who are younger tend to think in terms that are “concrete.” You have to actually tell them “When you yell at me, it’s disrespectful.” Don’t assume that just because your child has reached adolescence, he has insight into how his behavior comes off to other people. Sometimes it’s even hard for us – as parents – to pin down. There are times it may be a tone of voice or just the way something was said that sounded like it had “attitude.” Again, decide if those are things that can be let go from time to time or if it’s frequent enough that it’s a pattern that needs to be addressed.

Also, let your child know which behaviors will result in potential consequences: “The next time you yell at me, there will be no friends over for the weekend,” or whatever your consequence may be. Remember to keep consequences realistic and short term when the issue is only mild to moderate disrespect. You want the “punishment to fit the crime,” so to speak. And what you’re really doing is

showing your child that when she treats others disrespectfully, she's not likely to get many nice things done for her in return.

4. **Give your child alternative problem-solving skills.** If your child is handling her frustration or anger in a way that is disrespectful or unacceptable, talk with her about different ways she can express herself appropriately. You can actually role-play different situations with your child. Have her play the parent and you play her. Give her the words she can use to let you know she's disappointed or unhappy. Because in life, she's going to have to express being unhappy or frustrated – not just to you, but to others such as friends, teachers and eventually a boss or spouse. It can be valuable to ask yourself, "How am I teaching my child to treat others? Am I modeling for her how to treat others respectfully?" But ultimately, it's your child's responsibility to manage her own emotions and behavior by using the tools you provide her.

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5. **Provide positive reinforcement.** Recognize times your child *does* behave in a respectful way toward you or others and make sure he knows you're aware of it: "You know, I really enjoyed talking to you this way today. I hope we can have more conversations like this." Even if he was only respectful for a moment, notice and acknowledge it. You want to reinforce the behavior you want to see more often. Focusing only on behavior you *don't* want to see won't accomplish your parenting goal: to teach your child to behave in a respectful manner toward you and others.

### **A Final Note**

The tips in this article are intended to help parents deal with mild to moderate disrespect. Sometimes, particularly with children who are [oppositional or defiant](#), disrespect can escalate into a pattern of verbal abuse or more serious rule-breaking. Yes, breaking things in your home or [destroying property](#), staying out past curfew or not following the house rules is disrespectful. But those things are also part of a more serious pattern of conduct and behavioral issues. Even though a child's disrespect can be a frustrating problem, often what we see as problems are also opportunities to teach our children about values and life skills.

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