

Deal With Tweenage Attitude

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Sometime between the ages of 8 and 10 (earlier if older siblings are around) your mostly sweet-tempered munchkin, the one who broke into a wide grin the second you walked in the room, will look you in the eye and sneer, "Why should I?" when you remind her, again, to pick up her clothes and hang them in the closet. Perhaps she'll lob a sarcastic "So what?" when you inform her that unless she does, she won't be going to her best friend's birthday party. Her rude outbursts are piercing and you can't help but wonder: isn't she old enough by now to know better?

Yes, she is -- but she also needs to test her preteen mojo. "The middle school years are a time of huge physical, emotional, and cognitive [change](#)," notes child and adolescent psychologist Richard Gallagher, Ph.D., director of the Parenting Institute at New York University's Child Study Center. Your child is trying to figure out who she is and how she feels about things. "One way to do that is by flexing her verbal muscles and challenging your authority," says Dr. Gallagher. "She's purposely pushing you away, letting you know she's her own boss." When she questions everything you do or say ("And your point is?"), or cuts you off mid-sentence with a sarcastic "Mom, I just told you that," she's also learning to assert her own needs and ideas. "Who better to do that with than someone who will always love her?" he adds.

The problem is, middle schoolers don't have the maturity to know when they've crossed the line. The pre-frontal cortex -- the area in the brain that affects reasoning, impulse control and the ability to recognize the consequences of their actions -- isn't fully formed until the late teens or early 20s. What's more, it's overshadowed by the highly reactive amygdala, which triggers the brains' automatic fight-or-flight reflex. "When this area fires up, a child may instantaneously interpret just about anything you do or say as hostile -- and react accordingly," explains Steven C. Atkins, associate professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the Dartmouth Medical School.

Then, too, our society fosters this kind of behavior. "I call it the Bart Simpson affect," says Dr. Atkins, who is currently revamping the behavioral curriculum of a New Hampshire middle school to address issues of insolence. "We live in a racy, rude world. Kids listen to raunchy CD lyrics, read cruel posts on the Internet, and watch reality TV where the humor and drama is derived to a large extent from putting others down. And they witness the cynical, taunting comments of classmates at school." In the guise of being "cool," a child may adapt the tone of voice or verbal bullying of peers in order to fit in, explains Atkins, who is also coauthor of *Because I Said So: Dealing with Family Squabbles*. "His friends get away with it, so he figures, why not try it out?"

An Attitude Makeover

No one wants to raise a rude, bratty child. Yet what parents do, and don't do, causes insolence to escalate. "Parents are time-famined," says psychologist Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *Don't Give Me That Attitude*. "We're overtired and overworked. We yearn for good times with our kids, without arguments." We let snarky comments pass, or pick those clothes off the floor and hang them up ourselves.

Plus, so much of our culture is geared toward a child's success -- in school, on the athletic field -- that building moral character gets short shrift. "No one gets a trophy being kind, helpful or generous," says Borba. In fact, she sees a strong uptick in mouthing off among preteen girls. "Parents are so focused on teaching their daughters to advocate for themselves, they fail to show them how to be assertive without being aggressive and disrespectful," she notes.

While the best defense against kid attitude is an early offense, it's never too late for a makeover. Most likely, you won't banish the back talk forever, but these tips will help you mitigate it -- as well as develop a thicker skin:

Figure out what's behind it. Sometimes an obnoxious attitude is a reaction to stress, disappointment, or even [too little sleep](#). Middle schoolers are trying to prove themselves [academically](#) and [socially](#), and it can be

a challenge to keep negativity and cynicism at bay when they're emotionally depleted. If your child had a fight with a friend, or is doing poorly in school, a flippant, "so-what" tone may conceal fear or anxiety. If she hears you or a spouse speak rudely to others, she'll copy that behavior.

Target one attitude at a time. Do you bristle at his fresh mouth or sense of entitlement? Are you most offended by her barely-under-the-breath remarks or the way she rolls her eyes when you speak? While there may be several things you wish would disappear instantly, focus on one at a time.

Nurture the attitude you want to see. Once you've targeted the offensive attitude, zero in on what you'd like to see instead. For instance, an insensitive child needs to be caring and empathic; the non-compliant child can learn to be respectful and dependable; the demanding child should be considerate. "Don't try to do this alone," warns Borba. "Attitude change requires the cooperation of other family members, grandparents, caregivers, teachers and coaches. Get their input, so you can figure out whether she's acting impudently with everyone or just with you."

Stay cool. Like the schoolyard bully who hones in on the one kid he knows will cry, your child wants to see that he's ticking you off -- and he's probably quite good at it. That's why you need to plan ahead. "Pretend you're on Oprah," says Borba. "Memorize a short script so you can clearly but calmly respond to a child's hostility in the heat of the moment." Never lash back ("Don't you dare speak to me that way, young lady!"); she'll focus on your anger, not what you're saying, and before you know it you'll be embroiled in a power struggle. Instead, repeat your zero-tolerance policy and, if she continues, ignore her or walk out of the room. You can say, "When you're ready to speak respectfully, you can find me in the kitchen."

Draw your line in the sand. During a peaceful moment, patiently point out the attitudes you're concerned about. Make it clear that, while you understand her feelings and opinions, you won't tolerate her response. You could say: "I know you think I'm not being fair, but I won't be spoken to like that." Or: "That may be the way you talk to your friends, but it's never okay with me." Give her another chance to respond in a kinder, gentler way: "If you'd like me to help you, ask politely," or "You call me clueless and that hurts my feelings. Can you say it another way?" Dr. Atkins' mantra is: "You can be mad, but you can't be mean."

Follow through with consequences. If your child has slipped into the habit of being disrespectful, he really may not be aware of it or, in the heat of the moment, realize how wounding his words are. Still, Borba advises that you "flat out refuse to respond until he does." If it continues, ground him or take away privileges: no cell phone or X-Box, an early curfew, missing an important social event.

Notice the good times. "You'll need a thick skin to ignore infuriating comments, but the more you do, the quicker they'll stop," says Gallagher. When they do, let your child know you're proud of her. And hang in there: by the age of 14 or 15, the nice kid you used to know will come back.