Strategies to Help Sarcastic Kids

Introduction

As kids hit latency age and the ‘tween years, when peer pressure builds, they can become sarcastic with friends and/or family, thinking it is cool to respond with wisecracks or the most current equivalent to “Well, Duhhhh!” that they have heard on a TV show or on the web. Things get even more tricky when the sarcastic comments are witty, which they can be. If their friends laugh, the attention can reinforce the sarcastic behavior making it more difficult to combat; however, it is possible to combat sarcasm.

I recommend a three-pronged approach that parents can use to combat sarcasm.

1. Teach pro-social skills.

2. Develop positive self-esteem.

3. Structure your home life atmosphere in a way that models respect and fairness, and discourages sarcasm or even teasing that carries a stinger.

Pro-social Skill Development

Kids can be taught how to be a friend and how to keep a friendship. Watch TV shows with them, and notice/point out anything that depicts sarcasm. Then you might have a discussion that encourages “empathy,” the ability to see another’s perspective by imagining yourself in their place.

Questions such as, “How do you think (the character being the target of sarcasm) felt when (the character being sarcastic) said, “You’re (gay, queer, weird, etc.)? You can also teach social skill development with books that have object lessons. “the Self Esteem Shop” online carries many books of this nature.

Also, pay attention when your older child has a “play” date with a friend at your home. You can interrupt and re-direct if you hear words, tone or even see facial expressions that express sarcasm. Slightly older children, such as fourth, fifth graders, and middle schoolers are beginning to place great stock in peer relationships. Talk to your children about your values re how you believe friends should treat one another.

To develop social skills, ask them questions about how they want friends to treat them. Be aware of the emotional underpinnings of sarcasm. Often it can point to low self-esteem or an upset. Putting someone else down to build up the Self is not an uncommon strategy. You might comment like this: “I noticed you were sarcastic to (so and so). Sometimes people are sarcastic when something is bothering them, I wonder if something might be bothering you.”

Positive Self-esteem Development

How you interact with your child will go a long way to combating sarcasm. Use realistic and specific praise for the behaviors you wish to reinforce, such as respectful interacting.
Your child’s self-esteem is directly related not only to parents’ words, but also to the tone of voice. Encourage self-esteem by refraining from sarcasm about your child or about a child’s mistakes or awkward efforts at something new.

You can normalize missteps and mistakes by referring to them as “just the way we all learn.” Follow up with, “What can you do differently next time?”

Redirecting is particularly important when your child is sarcastic to you, to a sibling or to a friend. Being sarcastic back will reinforce the behavior even though it may seem like a natural object lesson. Redirect the behavior by asking, something like, “Can you say that to (the individual) in a more respectful way, please.”

Home Life Atmosphere

This is a category in which parents really have some power to model the type of behavior they want to elicit from their children. Children will mimic what they see and hear. When parents commit to an atmosphere of non-sarcasm, fairness and respect in dealing with each other, with their children and with family friends and others, the pro-social, self-esteem lessons will be structured in.

In your home life, you have golden opportunities to use discipline (not punishment) to guide your children to non-sarcastic behavior. Use a no-shame, no-blame approach. For example, if your child begins a conversation with a sarcastic remark about you, you might say something like, “We can have a conversation when you speak to me respectfully.”

When a child is sarcastic, it is normal to want to reprimand, or be sarcastic back, but those responses can produce shame, which leads to low esteem and possibly more sarcasm.

Think in terms of correcting course and redirecting behavior. For example,

When your child says, “You’re a……………” or just uses a “tone” you can employ comments like these:

What you just said hurt my feelings. Can you say that in a kinder way?

Put yourself in (               )’s position. How do you think you would feel if someone said to you what you just said to her?

You can also call out the sarcasm by naming it. Try saying something like:

“Speaking sarcastically is not going to get you what you want. Please say it again a different way.”
(Remember if you say you will or won’t do something until the sarcasm ends, be sure to follow through.)

Bear in mind: children learn what they live. If you are sarcastic to them, they will learn to be sarcastic. Your own behavior is your best ally.

And remember to keep from laughing even if you think a sarcastic comment is funny.