

Expanding Vocabularies

Why kids learn to swear and what to do about it

By JOANNA NESBIT

One afternoon, my 6-year-old daughter came home from school with a question that surprised me. “Mom, me and Eva were in the bathroom today, and there was a word starting with F on the bathroom stall,” Leah said. “Eva said it was bad. Do you know any bad words starting with F?”

“F?” I repeated. Truth? Hedge? Lie? “Hmmm, no, I don’t know any bad words starting with F.”

I wasn’t ready for Leah to know this word, to pass it on to her 3-year-old brother or to trot it out in public places where younger kids (and their mothers) would hear. I thought if I ignored the issue it would go away. Thus began a year of language acquisition, and I don’t mean learning how to say “Mama.”

Understand It’s Inevitable

Turns out I was lucky we made it to age six. Learning language is part of being human, and swearing is part of language, says Dr. Timothy Jay, psychology professor at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and author of *Why We Curse*. “Swearing is not like a spice added to food, it’s part of the food, the emotional food,” he says. Infants come into this world wired for emotional communication. Additionally, kids are language “vacuum cleaners,” learning on the order of ten words a day to acquire some 40,000 words by adolescence.

In other words, even if you don’t swear at home, your kids will learn the words. Elise Dunbar, of Greenville, SC still recalls the day her preschool-aged daughter was hunting for a lost jacket with Dad. Having searched all over the house, tiny Megan marched into her mother’s closet, put her hands on her hips, and said, “Where is that f***** thing?” No one knows where she heard it.

But according to Jay, learning taboo words at a young age is normal. “Certainly they’ve got a sense of it by preschool, and by school age, elementary schoolers know this stuff,” he says.



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Developmentally, part of every child’s job in every culture is to learn what the taboos are. “Everyone learns how to swear — whether they do it or not, that’s another thing,” says Jay.

Recognize the Source

Kids, especially boys, swear for all kinds of reasons, including to be funny, to get attention, to fit in, and to prove independence, particularly at middle school age. However, most people, kids included, swear out of anger or frustration—two-thirds is anger, says Jay.

When kids are small, they’re just repeating what they hear at home, and, contrary to popular belief, it’s not coming from the TV. Two-thirds of parents swear around their kids, Jay says, but have rules against kids swearing. “What exists in the media can reinforce what kids have heard, but it has to reverberate with what they already know.”

It’s not just the words kids repeat. When parents curse, kids are picking up on your tone, says James O’Connor, author of *Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing*. Parents are most often expressing a negative emotion with exuberance. Imitation is just a natural thing kids do.

Don’t Panic

O’Connor and Jay agree that overreacting to kids’ swearing is not the way to go. Indeed, punishment can be counter-productive, giving offensive words more power than you want them to have. Keep the following strategies in mind, and you’ll lay the groundwork for a cuss-free household.

Ignore it. If you hear your very young child swear, consider letting it slide. To make a big deal puts the word on the child’s radar when it could have been a one-time experiment. Don’t laugh, either. Often, adults laugh out of surprise or discomfort, but laughing is a sure way to reinforce the words.

Skip the discipline. When young kids trot out cuss words for fun, it's more effective to talk about the words than to enforce a consequence. Kids don't understand what they're saying, and disciplining your child will only prompt him to use the words — again — when he wants a reaction from you, says O'Connor.

Explain your family's values. Every household is different. In ours, we explain that some words offend, while others are plain hurtful — these include swear words, slurs, and anything mean — and we tell the kids we expect them to respect others. (We also don't swear ourselves.)

Look for the source of anger. If your child swears out of anger, it's more important to help your child cope with the crisis at hand than to address language. Swearing is a symptom, says Jay, and it's more effective to teach anger management than to punish kids for swearing. Address your concerns about language after your child is calm.

Teach alternatives for positive coping skills. O'Connor gives presentations to the nation's school kids on why swearing isn't useful. By teaching kids how to cope without swearing, we're not only teaching kids civility, we're teaching them the patience and tolerance to manage everyday problems in a positive way.

Pave the way to the future. Talking frankly about swearing and slangy body terms, even saying the words with your kids, can eliminate the mystique. If parents avoid the words altogether, they may communicate anxiety about the body and sex. Open conversations will lay the groundwork for important discussions about sex when children are older. "By the time your kids are adolescents, they'll be doing things they don't want to tell you about. If a kid can't say a swear word to his parents, he's certainly not going to talk about sex with his parents," says Jay.

Deal with chronic swearing (yours too). Most kids won't swear as a matter of course if you address swearing in a calm, open manner. But if your child persists, try giving him alternatives, such as saying the words in his room (my family's solution), acceptable expletives (fiddlesticks!), or a swearing jar that calls for a penny or nickel for each infraction — parents included.

Joanna Nesbit is a freelance writer who writes about parenting, family, travel or any combination of these topics. Her articles and essays have appeared in parent, custom and online publications.

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