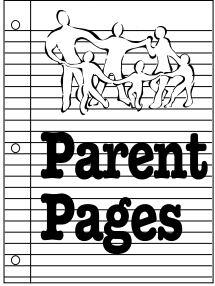


Those Four Letter Words



The first time you hear a six-year-old or ten-year-old let loose with a whole string of unacceptable words, it can be quite a shock! While inappropriate language is more evident with school-age children, even pre-schoolers repeat objectionable words they may hear.

When children swear, parents often feel distressed or angry. Parents who never or rarely swear themselves blame television, their child's friends and other adults for influencing their child's language. Even parents who often use profane language wish that children would not follow their example.

Here are some things you can do to keep those "four-letter words" under control.

Have clear rules

Let children know that swearing is not acceptable, that you don't like it and will not permit it. If kids understand that bad language is not allowed, they will be less likely to use it. In setting rules, it is important to discuss why the rule is needed.

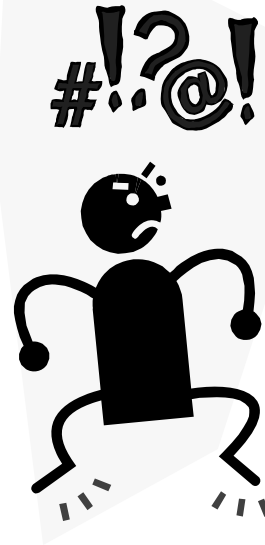
Remain calm when kids curse

Give yourself and the child a cooling-off period before you attempt to deal with the language. For example, you may say, "We both need a break before we can talk about or deal with this."

Understand the cause and teach the child better ways to express himself

When a child begins to use bad language, it is important to determine why. Children use inappropriate language for many different reasons. Sometimes the language is used out of ignorance. At other times, children use inappropriate lan-

guage to meet a need. You will be more likely to deal effectively with problem language when you understand the cause of the behavior. Here are some reasons why young people may use inappropriate language and some suggestions for dealing with each situation.



◆ *To be accepted by friends.*

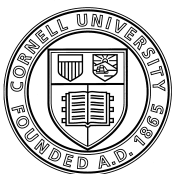
A child with poor social skills may not know how to enter a group, how to work cooperatively or how to be a friend. The only way that child may be able to get attention from the other kids is to use inappropriate language. By teaching social skills to the child, you will

help eliminate the real cause of the problem and the "bad" language is likely to stop.

◆ *To shock adults.* Sometimes young people learn they can exert power over adults by the language they use. It is difficult for adults to hear kids using offensive or sexually explicit words because we understand the full meaning of those words. However, young people often do not know what the words mean. They say the words simply because they cause a reaction in others. By remaining calm and not overreacting when children use inappropriate language you will take away some of the "shock value" of using the words.

◆ *Because the words are used at home.* Children are exposed to many different family situations. In some homes, use of inappropriate language is common. Parents need to realize that they are the primary role models for children's behavior. Explain to the child that the words are not acceptable and teach acceptable alternatives for expressing emotions, while at the same time demonstrating the proper way to deal with strong feelings.

~Continued~



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- ◆ ***To express negative emotions.*** Inappropriate language often is used during arguments or when a child is frustrated with a situation. In this case it is important to teach the child acceptable ways to express his or her emotions. For example, you could say, "If you are mad at Jerry, say, I'm mad at you!" Or, you might say, "I understand you are frustrated, but the word you said bothers others. If you are upset, you may say Rats!"(or whatever word you feel is acceptable) instead.
- ◆ ***To find out what the words mean.*** Many times children use words without understanding what they mean. Sometimes children use these words because they want to know what they mean. This often happens with sexual words. A brief explanation of what the word means will often take care of the problem. Be sure children know the correct names for body parts. If they refer to anatomical parts when they swear, use humor to suggest they use correct terminology!
- ◆ ***To hurt someone's feelings.*** Some children may intentionally use offensive language to hurt another person or get revenge. Let children know how words can hurt or offend. Help them understand the other person's feelings in the situation.

Establish reasonable consequences

The above examples show how important it is to teach children alternatives to using inappropriate language. However, this teaching takes time. And some children will need the added incentive of consequences to help them inhibit the use of the forbidden words. It is important to

choose consequences carefully and to use them sparingly. The consequence should be reasonable and carefully tied to the behavior.

If a child uses bad language around other children, the child may need to play alone for fifteen minutes. If a child continually swears while completing a project, she may need to put the project away until the next day. When children swear to shock or upset parents, parents can send them out of the room until they can use acceptable language -- or leave the room themselves. Children who continually use words to shock the teachers may need to tell their parents what words they said.

Try having the children set their own consequences. You will probably have to tone them down a bit -- it's not reasonable to stay out of an activity for a week! However, young people are more likely to accept consequences they have established for themselves.

"Four-letter words" are common during the school years and sometimes during the pre-school years. By understanding why they are used and by using appropriate guidance and discipline techniques, you can help to eliminate their use.

Source: Christine M. Todd, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension. Parent Pages was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.