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Special Report #2: 10 Tips to Help Your Teens Stop Swearing

By Judy Gruen

"What the &^%\$?"
"Are you s***ing me?"
"This feels like s***."

If your teenagers are like most others today, they swear as naturally as they chug down sodas after school. And most likely, you are fed up with it. What can you possibly do about your teens who swear like soldiers under fire?

It wasn't that long ago when swearing was saved for "special occasions" -- such as accidentally hammering your finger instead of the nail, or getting sideswiped by another car. In 1973, comedian George Carlin performed a routine called the "Seven Dirty Words You Can't Say On Television." Carlin repeated the seven words in rapid-fire delivery for both shock and comic effect. But today, people would be shocked to hear "heck" when people would expect "hell" or "darn" for the expected "damn."

With vulgarities so common in our media and culture, you really can't blame teens for following the example set by the adults around them. But that doesn't mean you don't have the right -- and the obligation -- to help them clean up their acts.

Potty-mouth talk may be common, but it degrades the speaker and often insults the hearer. Most four-letter words are coarse, harsh, hostile, angry, unimaginative. Because they are also overused, they become meaningless as well. As a parent, you don't want your teen to sound coarse, harsh, angry, and unimaginative. And beyond that, consistent swearing damages your teens in the following ways:

- Swearing increases feelings of hostility and anger. It can actually make your teen an angrier person.
- Makes your teen appear unintelligent.
- Lowers their stature in the eyes of teachers and the kinds of friends you wish they had.
- Lowers their stature in the eyes of prospective employers in the future.
- Leaves them more vulnerable to accusations of harassment.
- Increases your teen's feelings of insecurity if you fail to set guidelines for acceptable behavior.
- Failing to break what may already be a long-standing habit will make it that much harder for your teens to stop swearing when they are finally mature enough to realize the detriments of foul language on their own.

No sane person will pretend that teaching teenagers to swear off swearing will be easy. You already know that teens are unusual life forms, famously resistant to many of the lessons you have to teach. And despite your best efforts, some teens will still swear among friends and when they feel socially obligated to do so. But following these steps will help you sensitize your teens to how using foul language can hurt them. You'll also help them gain more control over their words and emotions. This is the best part of the enterprise: While helping to elevate their language, at the same time you'll also boost their sense of dignity, self-control, and mood.

Once you understand where the swearing is coming from, and what your teens are trying to achieve by it, you'll be in a much stronger position to stem the flood of cursing in your home.

It's Not Too Late

Both children and adults are products of their environments. Ask yourself: Do you swear in front of your kids? Be honest. Teens only pretend not to hear you, but they hear you loud and clear. If you swear, your kids will surely follow your lead. Don't blame them if you've set the wrong example. The growing acceptance of vulgarity in our society has debased everyone's communication skills. Unless you have fought against this tide from the beginning, you'll certainly face an uphill battle now. But don't despair: It's not too late to lift your language from R-rated territory back down to G.

1. Stop Swearing Yourself

Kids have great respect for parents who can admit that they were wrong. Too few parents are secure enough in their parenting skills to do so. Unglue your teen's fingers from the computer keyboard. Let them just type GTG, POS ("Got to go, parent over shoulder") and unplug them from their iPods. Then sit them down for a chat. You can do this at dinner, but carving out a special time to talk will convey that you have something serious to discuss, and you'll have their attention.

Kids appreciate honesty, so come clean right away. You can say something like, "I realize that too many of us are using foul language, and it's the wrong way to speak. Even when we're angry or frustrated, speaking this way hurts us and those around us. It damages our home environment, which I want to be peaceful and loving. I apologize for setting a bad example with my own language, and I'm making an effort to improve it. I hope you'll forgive me, and I'm asking you to make the same effort."

Even if you see eye-rolling, don't be dismayed. You will already have made a lasting impression on your kids through your humility. Don't over-talk the topic, either. You aren't giving a lecture, you're

trying to open a discussion. It's the first line in a campaign to sensitize the teens (and yourselves) to using kinder, gentler and more meaningful language.

2. "But Everybody Does It!"

Your kids may respond with the "Everybody does it" refrain or "It's just words." But as James O'Connor, author of "Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing" (<http://www.cusscontrol.com>) points out, in most cases, cursing is more than just words. "There's a tone and attitude behind the swearing that expresses some form of negativity, criticism, hostility, or bitterness," making it a form of verbal violence, he says. Once you deflate the "It's just words" argument, the "Everybody does it" argument is even easier to shoot down. It's the weakest defense in a kid's arsenal since it's no defense against indefensible behavior.

Your teens may also argue that this is a freedom of speech issue. In today's society people are quick to promote their own rights, but they often forget that other people have rights, too, including the right not to be verbally assaulted by profanity.

Swear words are also lazy. "You can use it to express both joy and sorrow," O'Connor says. "But then it's not very clear. 'Who the s***, cut the s***, hot s***, etc.' It can describe all the senses or mean anything, and therefore it means nothing."

3. Explain the Link Between Your Language and Your Moods

The hostility inherent in foul language itself increases feelings of anger, which raises stress hormones. Since feeling angry makes you more prone to swearing again, it's a vicious cycle. O'Connor, who has studied this topic for years, also observes that people who don't swear have better, more optimistic dispositions. So if you want to be happier, talk cleaner.

4. Redefine Cool

Teens want and need to be considered cool, and they may like the image that they project when they swear because they feel it raises their "coolness quotient." Your job is to show them how uncool it really is.

Cool kids have confidence and self-control. Swearing reveals the opposite temperament: aggressive, unkind, insensitive, unimaginative, inarticulate, and out of control. Most people (even teens!) link inarticulateness with another four-letter word: dumb. And dumb is never cool. Some kids fear that if they stop swearing, others will perceive them as less cool. The fact is, other kids probably won't even notice if your teen stops swearing.

5. Build Your Teen's Sense of Dignity and Belonging

Teens also curse for the following reasons:

- To get attention, a way of saying, "I'm here! Listen to me!"
- Guys may swear to show they belong in the peer group.
- Girls may swear to show they have leveled the playing field between the sexes.
- To express rebellion from adult authority.
- When they feel they're on the defensive.

As Professor P.M. Forni, director of the Civility Project at Johns Hopkins University explains, "Secure individuals can more easily dismiss an offensive remark once they realize that the remark is more a reflection of the person who said it rather than the person on the receiving end."

Therefore, if your teens swear out of insecurity, one powerful antidote is to look for ways to build their sense of self. Remind them that they are simply too fine and too smart to resort to foul language. Few teens would admit it, but they still need heaps of reassurance and love from their parents. Aside from improving their language, paying more attention to building your teens' sense of dignity and purpose will yield great benefits to them psychologically and morally.

Don't let their big size fool you: Teens still need your attention, discipline and love. And you still have more influence on them than you think.

6. Set Standards for Your Home

Even if you're getting to this a bit late, don't be afraid to set standards. It's your responsibility to try to create a peaceful, civil tone in your home. Tell your kids, "This is a swearing-free environment," and establish consequences for violating the house rules. Even if they slip up accidentally, enforce a consequence. (Charging a dollar per word is something most teens will feel acutely. And if you let a four-letter word slip, put your money where your mouth is. You'll undermine your entire project if you take a "do as I say, not as I do" approach.)

Don't overreact to slip-ups, since you'll create a needless power struggle. However, if your teens are flagrantly disregarding your rules, impose a stronger consequence, such as withholding allowance, permission to use the car, or something similarly memorable. Whatever consequences you choose, be firm. It's your home. You are the parent. Act like one.

7. Build Incentives

Use the carrot as well as the stick. Offer your teens a fun night out somewhere (a baseball game, a favorite restaurant) to reward them if they go for an agreed-upon stretch of time with no swearing. This is a win-win: You have just scheduled time with your kids that you might not otherwise have spent together. Continue to applaud their efforts, acknowledging that it is hard to break a habit.

8. Encourage Better Entertainment Choices

This will be more difficult, especially with older teens who will resent your intrusion into what they are listening to on their iPods or seeing at friends' homes. Still, you aren't obligated to give your kids money to see a movie you disapprove of. And why not call parents of your teen's friends to discuss what movies they are allowing them to see in their homes? Many parents are shockingly apathetic when it comes to monitoring their kids' entertainment choices, despite the clear-cut influence of the media on our kids' language and behavior. We easily see the connection between environmental pollutants or pesticides in our kids' food and go to great lengths to avoid them, but fail to see the connection between cultural pollution and our kids' moral fiber. The connection is there. Pay attention to it.

Technology can also help. TVGuardian® The Foul Language Filter® (www.tvguardian.com or www.familysafemedia.com), decodes and monitors the hidden closed-caption text of TV shows. Foul words or phrases are automatically muted from prerecorded programs (not live events such as sporting

games). The device also has multiple filter settings and works with DVD or VCR in addition to cable or antenna inputs. Until recently, you could buy movies edited for language, sexual situations and violence, but those film editing companies are now prohibited by law (for copyright reasons) from continuing their work. You may still be able to find a few floating around on eBay, but your best bet now is to buy a specialized DVD player from www.clearplay.com, which works by using filtering software on a movie-by-movie basis. With a membership, your DVD player will receive automatic filtering updates for the latest movies.

9. Offer Your Teens Better Word Choices

The English language is wonderfully rich, yet we speak like linguistic paupers. You can have fun with your teens by sitting down and coming up with alternative words to the tired stand-bys of cuss words. Use a thesaurus and go to town. Or, make up your own. One of my teens uses "Shrek!" for another S-word. It has that satisfying final "k" sound, it feels good to say it, and it gets the emotion conveyed. Once you start looking for them, you'll be amazed at how many wonderful, colorful words and phrases can substitute pleasingly for the four-letter monsters. Some may sound funny at first, but who knows? They may catch on, and your teens will sound original, smart -- and even cool.

Instead of "p***ed off:"

Galled
Peeved
Miffed
Roiled
Ruffled
Crabbed
Spleeny

Instead of the s-word or the f-word, try these:

Vile
Fiendish
Crummy
Nasty
Goshawful
Putrid
Bilge
Piffle
Guff
Moonshine
Bushwa
Twaddle
Shrek
Heinous

10. Be Patient -- Results Will Follow

Your kids didn't start swearing suddenly one day, and they won't suddenly stop, either. For many teens, swearing will be a phase that they will outgrow. For others, swearing masks a deeper anger and insecurity that therapy may be required to fix. But for the average, normal teen who fell into swearing

simply because it's all around them, your efforts to help them understand how deeply words matter and what a large impact they have on how they will be perceived by others will go a long way. Your teens will benefit enormously as they grow into adulthood if you can help them sound more mature, educated and logical, not high-schoolish and emotional.

So go gather up your teens and set out on your campaign, gosh darn it! You've got nothing to lose but that &*%\$#@ language fouling up your house!

Resources:

<http://www.cusscontrol.com> (home of James O'Connor's "Cuss Control Academy")

<http://web.jhu.edu/civility/index.html> (Dr. Forni's Civility Project web site)

<http://www.youthdevelopment.org> (non-partisan organization working to prevent at-risk behaviors among youth)

<http://www.familysafemedia.com> (clearinghouse of media filtering products)

www.clearplay.com (specialized DVD players that support filtering software for movies)

<http://www.AAMFT.org> (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, to find a therapist in your area.)

"Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing"

by James O'Connor

"Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct" by P.M. Forni

"Home Invasion: Protecting Your Family in a Culture That's Gone Stark Raving Mad," by Rebecca Hagelin

If you have more questions about this topic, feel free to email me at

judy@judygruen.com. Check out my other special reports, including Special Report #1, "13 Ways to Keep Young Kids From Swearing," along with my award-winning humor books and columns on <http://www.judygruen.com>.