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Special Report #1: 13 Ways to Keep Young Kids From Swearing

By Judy Gruen

You are a parent with a young child, and the two of you are waiting in line at the grocery store. Suddenly, the cashier lets a four-letter word fly while she talks to the cashier in the next check stand. As angry as you are over this verbal assault on your child's innocence, it's too late. Your child has been exposed -- again -- to the kind of coarse language that only a few years ago no respectable person would have dared to use in public.

You know that if your child hears this kind of talk often enough, it'll only be a matter of time before she begins to copy the big kids and the "adults" around her.

Can you really keep your children's language G-rated in an R-rated society? You bet.

Use the following steps to sensitize your children to the idea that words matter. In the process, you'll reap other important benefits:

- Increased self-esteem in your children
- Increased ability for self-restraint in your children
- A more wholesome and nurturing home environment
- Greater confidence in your own parenting abilities
- A closer relationship with your children

Keep in mind that these tips are meant for children under 12. If you have teens who swear, check out my Special Report #2: "10 Tips to Help Your Teens Stop Swearing."

1. Monitor and Filter Your Kids' Media Diet

This is enormously important. You may already restrict your children's entertainment to tame, kiddy-themed TV programming and DVDs, but do you realize how much coarse and vulgar talk may be wafting into their little ears from other sources?

Television and radio (even AM and FM, forget about satellite) programming is rife with vulgar language and content too adult for children. Ask yourself: Do your kids need to hear reporters discuss carnage from a terrorist bombing or a review of a Broadway show whose main character is a sex organ? Once you pay attention, you'll be surprised at how much adult content your kids are exposed to. Language aside, young kids understandably become very unsettled by talk of war and violence. Try to preserve your children's fleeting innocence and shut off the news or reality shows when they're around.

Want to relax with your kids and watch a TV show or movie but can't find enough clean sources of entertainment? Technology can help. TVGuardian® The Foul Language Filter® (<http://www.tvguardian.com> or 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 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 pre-edited films floating around on eBay, but your best bet now is to buy a specialized DVD player from www.clearplay.com, which works in conjunction with filtering software, designed on a movie-by-movie basis. With a membership, your DVD player will receive automatic filtering updates for the latest movies.

And by all means, don't allow a child to have a TV in his or her own room. Aside from everything else, it builds a terrible barrier between you and your child.

2. Limit Your Child's Access to the Computer and the Internet

Many parents and psychologists are only now beginning to realize the potentially massive and corrosive effects of Internet use on adults and children. Cyber-addictions to porn, gambling, shopping and even just chatting and emailing have literally destroyed marriages and induced depression in many children and teens. MySpace.com and other sites popular with kids are also filled with foul language and worse.

Young children in particular are vulnerable to cyber-stalkers who frequent chat rooms and pretend to be their ages. Pop-up ads can lure children to porn sites filled with language and images that can inflict lasting damage. Keep a good internet filter on your computer, such as SafeEyes (<http://safeeyes.com>) or Bsafe (<http://www.bsafeonline.com>), strictly limit the amount of time your child can spend on the computer, and keep the computer in a public area where you can see what your child is doing and who he is talking to. Like the TV, do not let a child have a computer in his room.

3. Make Your Home a No Swearing Zone

Even if you and your spouse are careful with your language, friends, relatives, colleagues and other visitors may think nothing of using four-letter words in front of your kids. This is where you step in to defend your home and the emotionally healthy environment you work to maintain in it. It can be awkward, especially if the one cussing like a longshoreman is your rich Aunt Betty. But that doesn't exempt you from politely taking a stand. Here are a few ways to handle these situations:

- If the individual cusses in front of a group, don't embarrass her publicly but ask discreetly to speak to her privately. Then explain that you'd appreciate her watching her language in your home because you are offended by that language and it's not good for your children.
- If the visitor has sworn only in front of you and your kids but no one else, make the same request in front of your kids. In showing this kind of backbone, you'll gain more respect from both the visitor and your offspring.

4. Stop Swearing Yourself

If you have joined the ranks of the four-letter word society, resign your membership. Even when you don't think your kids hear you (such as when they're playing in the other side of the house!), remember that they have "kid radar" that will ensure they'll zip into the room right when you let a cuss word fly. If your child catches you using a "bad word," apologize for it. Look directly at your child and admit that you were wrong to speak that way. Immediately let them see you put a dollar in the jar that you've set up as the "bank of bad words." (See below). Your honesty and humility will make a lasting impression.

5. Don't Overreact

Kids love to get a reaction, but emotional reactions to swearing may actually increase the chances that your children will swear again. Adele Faber, co-author of several bestselling parenting books, including "How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk," advises, "Tell your child, 'This language really turns me off. I expect you to give me another way to tell me how you feel.'"

6. Use Common Sense Rewards and Consequences

You probably already have a reward system in place for your child's behavior. If your child had begun to swear but is making progress toward cleaner language, praise her for her success and reward her to encourage her efforts. On the other hand, stick to your guns when she uses language that you have declared off limits. One popular and effective tip is to charge children per swear word, and the money goes into the "bank of bad words." When the jar is filled, the family uses the accumulated wealth for ice cream or other treat. (The hope is that you won't have enough for dinner at a fancy restaurant!) If they continue to swear, impose reasonable consequences, such as refusing to help them with homework or withdrawing a privilege. Don't hesitate to stand your ground. As expert Faber says, "Children can be childish, but adults need to be adultish." You are the adult. Act like one.

7. Get Help if the Problem is Out of Control

Kids who are defiant about your no-swearing policy may also be defiant in other areas. This defiance may mask deeper anger issues within your child that go way beyond language. In this case, recruit some expert parenting advice or ask for a referral to a good therapist.

8. Understand the Link Between Language and Moods

James O'Connor, author of "Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing," notes that 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, has also observed that people who don't swear have better, more optimistic dispositions than the cuss-happy. So if you want your children to be happier, help them talk cleaner.

9. Build Your Child's Sense of Dignity and Belonging

Children often curse as an attention-getter, a way of saying, "I'm here! Listen to me!" They may do it as a way to rebel from adult authority or to be cool. If your child is cursing as a way to capture more attention, try the following:

- Make sure you are paying enough attention to your child in the first place. Today's harried parents often scrimp on the attention and discipline they give to their children, either out of guilt for the long hours they work, fear of damaging their children's "self-esteem," or other reasons. Remember, your kids will find sure-fire ways to get your attention one way or another. Spend enough time with them so they won't feel a need to act out to get your attention.
- Try to teach your children that bad language usually offends people, but that no one is offended by NOT using it.
- Teach your children that they are making an impression on other people by the words they choose, and that clean language will make them more respected and admired by friends, teachers, and others in their lives.
- Teach your children that using better language and a wider vocabulary makes them smarter.
- Look for as many ways possible to build your child's sense of self and sense of purpose. Never underestimate how much love and reassurance they need from you during their formative years.

10. Help Your Children Find Better Word Choices

The English language is wonderfully rich, yet we speak like linguistic paupers. You can actually make a game out of this with your kids by sitting down with them and coming up with a list of alternative words to the tired stand-bys of cuss words. Use a thesaurus, dictionary or favorite well-written book and go to town. Or, make up your own. One of my kids chose to say "Shrek!" for another S-word. It has that satisfying final "k" sound so it feels good to say, and it releases that pressure valve of frustration. 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 kids will sound original, smart -- even cool!

Bonus tip: Offer your child's teacher the idea of having a contest to see who could come up with the most creative or the longest list of words that substitute for the "baddies." The class will roar with laughter at the results!

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
Gosh-awful
Putrid
Bilge
Piffle
Guff
Moonshine
Bushwa
Twaddle
Shrek
Heinous

11. Let Your Children See You Take a Stand

If you are out in public with your child and someone is cussing a blue streak, speak up. Complain to a store manager if you hear a clerk use four-letter words, or even tell the clerk directly how offended you are by his language. Of course, only do this in safe environments, where many other people are around.

12. Read to Your Children

Do you still read aloud to your independent readers? If you don't you should. Reading quality books aloud to your children (don't forget the classics) is a wonderful way to spend time with them. You can also take turns reading different characters' parts. Pay attention to what your kids are reading also. Today, books geared for kids as young as 3rd grade may deal with homosexuality, suicide, and other thematic material that you probably don't expect and your children don't need. Be a filter for your kids' reading material, and help them find wholesome literature that will expand their universe but not rob their innocence.

13. Be Patient -- Results Will Follow

Like any new parenting trick, getting your kids to stop swearing if they had already begun to do so may take time, but stick with it -- results are sure to pay off. And if you implement these changes before swearing becomes a habit, you're well on your way to raising a child who understands that words matter. Along the way, you'll help preserve their precious innocence, teach them self-restraint, expand their vocabulary, and give them the gift of more of your attention.

What a great payoff!

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.)

<http://fabermazlish.com> (web site of Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish)

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

by James O'Connor

"How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and Listen So Kids Will Talk," by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish.

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

If you have more questions on this topic, please feel free to email me at judy@judygruen.com. Check out my other Special Reports, including "10 Tips to Help Your Teens Stop Swearing," my award-winning humor books, and my popular "Off My Noodle" humor column, all on <http://www.judygruen.com>.