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Should we swear in front of our kids?

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Should we swear in front of our kids?

Abstract

The other day, my toddler son came home from childcare saying "piss poo". He is one of the younger children in his classroom and clearly he heard this phrase from an older child he admired. I couldn't help laughing at this unexpected outburst, which reinforced this behaviour - thus cementing the phrase in his emerging vocabulary. Now he goes around muttering "piss poo piss poo pissy poo" under his breath as he goes about his business. Is this a bad thing? Should I scold him for using words he doesn't know the meaning of? Should I discourage him from using swear words and refrain from swearing in front of him?

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THE CONVERSATION

Should we swear in front of our kids?

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Was that the F-bomb, mummy? from www.shutterstock.com.au

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The other day, my toddler son came home from childcare saying “piss poo”. He is one of the younger children in his classroom and clearly he heard this phrase from an older child he admired. I couldn’t help laughing at this unexpected outburst, which reinforced this behaviour – thus cementing the phrase in his emerging vocabulary. Now he goes around muttering “piss poo piss poo pissy poo” under his breath as he goes about his business.

Is this a bad thing? Should I scold him for using words he doesn’t know the meaning of? Should I discourage him from using swear words and refrain from swearing in front of him?

How do children pick up swear words?

Socialisation is the process whereby people learn the types of behaviours, values and other attributes that are necessary to participate in the groups to which they belong. Childhood is of course the most intensive period for socialisation, as children learn what they need to know to be adults.

Children are learning all the time, and not all socialisation is intentional. Indeed, when adults have their guards down these may be the very moments they are making the biggest impressions on their children.

Several methods are associated with the process of socialisation but perhaps the most powerful is the observational method – imitating the behaviour of a role model. The highly successful public service announcement “Children see, children do” from the National Association for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect reminds adults that their behaviours speak louder than words and to model positive behaviours.



They'll pick it up here anyway. from www.shutterstock.com

Children are most likely to learn to swear when people with whom they feel a connection – like peers, parents or figures in the media – use swear words. While children may not immediately begin to mimic bad words, they are learning that swearing is a socially acceptable behaviour.

As soon as children can speak, they can swear. Researchers Kristin and Timothy Jay found that children's vocabulary of swear words expands rapidly from ages 1-2 to ages 3-4, in parallel to the general explosion in language in the toddler and preschooler years. Their research found that by the time children began school at age 5, they already knew 42 taboo words.

Does it matter if they swear?

Everyone will have their opinions on whether or not it matters if people, especially children, swear. The important thing is that children understand the context for their behaviour.

Swear words have power because they are taboo and have shock value. Children learn through social cues that using a swear word with peers may elicit laughter and attention, which encourages them to use a swear word again. On the other hand, using the same swear word around teachers or parents can result in a punishment. In this way, children internalise awareness of the taboo nature of certain words with certain people in certain contexts.

There may be little damage from swearing in the playground, but thinking they can swear at their teacher is another matter entirely. Children need to be taught, through modelling appropriate behaviours, how to behave in various social situations and different contexts.

How to discourage children from swearing

Parents may inadvertently encourage swearing. The operant method of socialisation suggests that a behaviour is more likely to occur again when it is reinforced.

Reinforcement is an action that takes place after a behaviour that encourages that behaviour to occur again. Giving attention to a child after they swear can reinforce the behaviour, particularly if the child is swearing to get the reaction of shock and horror on mum's face.

A natural tendency can be to yell at a child who swears. Yelling can be a punishment that discourages the behaviour it follows. But, at the same time, yelling is also modelling a behaviour about how to react to the undesired behaviours of others. Yelling can also model poor emotional regulation around handling strong emotions.

A better method of socialisation for parents looking to discourage swearing is extinction. Extinction essentially involves ignoring undesired behaviours. By using extinction, a parent may be able to gradually reduce an unwanted behaviour by not giving a reaction or attention that may unintentionally encourage a behaviour.

This works best in combination with reinforcement of desired behaviours. If a child has developed a habit of swearing, the parent can ignore comments the child makes when swearing, but give attention when comments are made without swearing or when a non-offensive word is used as a substitute (like "sugar" for another s-word). This shows the child that the parent's attention is still available, and that it is not the child being ignored but the behaviour.



Children understand that swear words have shock value. from www.shutterstock.com

Extinction is not a magic bullet for swearing. At first, children may swear more aggressively to get attention. Using this method of socialisation requires persistence and consistency, preferably by the many important adults in a child's life, including relatives and teachers.

The key is to keep praising polite communications by the child and to ignore the swearing, so they get the message about what is acceptable behaviour. I can tell my toddler is searching my face for a reaction when he brings out "piss poo". Not cracking a smile when he does this can be a challenge though!

Should I swear in front of them?

Regardless of whether you swear in front of your children, they will have a fairly extensive profanity vocabulary from a fairly young age. The important thing they need to know is when it's okay to swear and when it's not.

The role of the parent here is to model the appropriate behaviour. No parent is a saint and we're all guilty of dropping the f-bomb when stubbing our toe or when the shopping bags split. As long as your children know the f-bomb is not appropriate language to take to their first job interview, then they're probably going to be okay.



Child development
Swearing