

# GROWING IDEAS

## Shocking Language!

### Why do young children swear?

When children swear, it is important to understand the hidden meanings behind those troubling words. Young children usually do not know what the swear words mean, so what is the swearing behavior communicating?



Is a child saying...

- "I am angry!"
- "This word makes people pay attention!"
- "I want to be like my favorite movie star!"
- "I need a friend!"

### Young children may swear for reasons related to their emotional needs.

- Young children may not know what else to say to express strong feelings, such as anger, frustration, or fear.
- Young children may need adult attention and support to follow a rule; wait to take a turn; feel comforted and safe; complete an activity; or make a friend.

### Young children may swear as part of their exploration and development of language.

#### For example:

- As young children learn about language, they are often fascinated by what makes some words important. Sometimes, young children use swearing to explore cause and effect.
- Children may be testing out the words to get a clearer understanding of what they mean.
- As children begin to feel more independent, they recognize that adults cannot control what they say, and want to test the limits.
- Older children may think swearing will help them make or impress friends.

### Swearing can occur as a result of environmental conditions.

- If children hear adults or other children swearing, they may mimic that behavior.
- If a favorite character from a movie or television show swears, children may copy that behavior to be more like the character.
- Young children may be saying that their activities or toys are not interesting, or do not match their stage of development.
- The physical space is over stimulating and may interfere with children's ability to calm themselves or stay focused.

Photograph by Monty J. Rand.

### **Preventing and responding to swearing behavior:**

It can be difficult to know how to respond to swearing. Family members and teachers should observe the child to understand where, when, and under what conditions he or she swears. They can then agree on a caring and consistent response.

### **Young children experiment with language as part of their growth and development.**

When adults respond emotionally to children's upset feelings, it may reinforce the behavior. Adults can assist children in learning appropriate use of language by calmly setting limits around swearing behavior, such as:

- Tell children it is okay to feel angry, frustrated, or frightened, but swearing is not okay.
- Notice children for using words instead of actions to express how they feel.
- Identify, label, and talk about how some words make children feel.
- Model messages children can use when they need adult help.
- Suggest strong but acceptable words or make up silly words.
- Use music and dance to encourage children to express their feelings.
- Make pictures or photo cards of faces to illustrate emotions.
- Use puppets to help children learn to role-play a conflict.
- Provide other ways to express feelings such as ripping paper.

It is important to understand that children's language and behavior can be influenced by what takes place around them.

### **When children test out words that are not appropriate:**

- Ask children what they think the swear word means so you can understand the reason why they chose to use the word.
- Help children identify swear words. Talk about why the words are unacceptable.
- Provide children with opportunities to make choices appropriate for their age.
- Help children learn other strategies to get peer attention.
- Address other underlying reasons for swearing.



### **Adults can reduce incidents of swearing in their settings by:**

- Modeling appropriate language use.
- Limiting children's exposure to swearing in real life, on television, in the movies, or other media.
- Reviewing the environment, routine, schedule, transitions, and activities to make sure they support children's ability to develop inner controls.

### **Where to learn more:**

Hewitt, D. (1995). *So this is normal too?* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Jones, S. (March 1996). "I'm so Mad I Could Scream." *Child Care Center Connections*. Retrieved October 6, 2004 from [http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cc41\\_mad.scream.html](http://www.nccc.org/Guidance/cc41_mad.scream.html)

See also: *Growing Ideas Toolkit* tip sheets: "Behavior Communicates," "Friends and Feelings," and "Building Belonging."



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Revised: 09/27/2006