

GROWING IDEAS

Shocking Language! — Swearing

Why do young children swear?

When children swear, it is important to understand the hidden meanings behind those troubling words. As with any behavior, it is important to learn as much as you can about a child and what may be causing this swearing behavior. 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 TV character!"
- "I need a friend!"
- "I feel sick or hurt."

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.
- Sometimes, although not very often, young children may have an underlying neurological or emotional disorder that includes echoing, shouting or repeating sounds or words like swearing.

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.
- Children may swear if the physical space is over-stimulating, interfering with their ability to calm themselves or stay focused.

Preventing and responding to swearing behavior.

It can be difficult to know how to respond to swearing. Family members and care and education professionals should observe the child to understand where, when, and under what conditions he or she swears. They can then focus on a caring and consistent response. Working as a team, the family members and care and education professionals may also rule out any need for learning more about the child's medical, physical or emotional development.

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 every child in learning appropriate use of language by calmly setting limits with swearing behavior, such as the following:

- Tell children it is okay to feel angry, frustrated, or frightened, but swearing is not okay.
- Acknowledge 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.

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

- Use puppets to help children learn to role-play a conflict.
- Use social stories to provide children with real life "scripts" to learn other ways to communicate.
- Provide other ways to express feelings, such as ripping paper.

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 or adult attention.
- Address other underlying reasons for swearing.

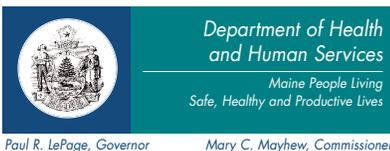
Adults can help to reduce incidents of swearing in their settings by doing the following:

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

Where to learn more:

See "[Shocking Language! — Swearing — Selected Resources](http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/swearres/)" online at: <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/swearres/>

See "[Shocking Language! — Swearing — Virtual Toolkit](http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/swearvtk/)" online at: <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/swearvtk/>



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