

# What the \*#@%?! How to respond when your child swears

September 22 2023, by Wendy Goff, Anne Rohde and Bin Wu

---



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Parents can often find themselves staring in bewilderment at the little human they helped to create.

Sometimes this bewilderment is centered around awe and amazement. Sometimes it is firmly entrenched in shock and embarrassment about a specific behavior they have just witnessed.

When a child swears it can be the latter that engulfs us.

## **Children learn to swear early**

There is little evidence to suggest children's [swearing](#), or swearing in general, has become more frequent. But in 2013 a [US study found](#) by the time children start school "they have the rudiments of adult swearing" (about 42 taboo words).

Parental reactions to children's swearing are generally cultural, embedded in context, and dependent on who else witnesses the behavior and how the swearing makes them feel at that moment.

Sometimes parents might look at children's swearing as a "bad" behavior that needs to be dealt with. At other times they might perceive swearing as no big deal. In some situations they may even see it as funny.

These reactions are also entangled in emotion and mood and are not typically consistent. This can be confusing for children.

## **Unspoken rules**

In English-speaking cultures there are unspoken social rules on who can say what to whom and in what situation. Research suggests men are more likely to swear in public than women and are less likely to be judged [negatively](#) if they do so.

Stand-up comedians swear a lot in their performances—and this is seen

as funny and [acceptable](#). But if an MP swore in parliament there would likely be a national outcry.

Similarly, while many adults swear, it is not seen as appropriate for children. This is tied to [historical perceptions of the child](#) as "innocent" and "good." As well as the idea childhood is a special time in [human development](#) and parents are responsible for shaping and protecting their offspring.

## **Swear words are a way to communicate**

But swear words are part of our language. Just like other words, they are expressions of our feelings, thoughts and intentions.

In this sense, when we think about children swearing, it is a developmental learning process that involves experimenting with different ways to express themselves and communicate.

When [younger children](#) swear, it is likely to come from overhearing the world and experimenting with their own [language learning](#).

When [older children](#) swear, it is more likely to be related to their social and emotional development as they learn to manage their emotions and develop their [identity](#).

Children tend to model adults. so if they are exposed to swearing [in the home](#) there is a good chance they will imitate the language they hear.

But if they haven't picked it up from their parents (or older siblings), by the time they go to school they will hear these words from other children in the playground. Children are also increasingly surrounded by screens and different types of media. So exposure to swearing is almost impossible for parents to monitor and control.

## What's the difference between a reaction and a response?

What parents can do is minimize the impact of this exposure on children's behavior. They can do this by responding rather than reacting to their children's swearing.

Human [reactions](#) are instantaneous and impulsive. They are about a need for immediate action, rather than a long-term goal or plan.

On the other hand, human [responses](#) are slower and provide a more considered and controlled approach to a situation.

In relation to children's swearing, it is important to try and respond so there is consistent messaging and they can learn about what is appropriate (and what is not).

## How to respond

Responding starts by understanding children will be exposed to swearing and parents cannot control every aspect of their kids' lives.

Responding also recognizes swearing is a developmental process for children and parents' role is to help them understand what they are saying and how it may be received. For example, you could say something like this: "Why did you choose that word? Is there a better word to use in that sentence?"

Or this: "I think you might be angry or upset. If I was trying to tell someone about my feelings I would say 'I am really frustrated right now.'"

Responses eliminate the need to ignore children's swearing, which can also send mixed messages. When adults respond they are taking control of their own behavior and as a result, the situation.

## **You can also work on prevention**

Responding also means putting some preventative strategies in place.

For example, [parents](#) might have conversations with their children around the language used in movies, TV shows and in music. This could involve reminding children how these often create imaginary worlds and "things are different in real life."

Parents might talk about how language has different functions and purposes. For example:

"Swearing at someone can hurt them so it is never OK to do this. "

They might also talk about how the situation or context matters. Such as:

"Singing a swear word in a song might be OK at home but you wouldn't sing that word at school. "

Ultimately, we are all human (and many of us swear from time to time). But we can teach [children](#) to be critical users of language, so they learn where, when and how to use different words.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: What the \*#@%?! How to respond when your child swears (2023, September 22)  
retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-09-child-1.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.