

INSIGHTS

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Mind their &*%@! language

Standards may change, but the job of parents hasn't altered. Teach kids to use language that doesn't offend others. The message to get across to the next generation is – if it's offensive then choose other words or say nothing at all.

What do you think when you hear kids swear in public?

If you're like me, you feel decidedly uncomfortable when kids of any age turn the air blue with profanities. Swearing shows lack of respect for others and a lack of awareness for their surroundings.

Teaching kids to use appropriate language is trickier now than in the past. For a start, standards have changed where many words – such as the F word – that were deemed inappropriate in the past are often heard on radio and seen in mainstream newspapers. And words that everyone agrees are inappropriate are frequently used in public forums, to the point that the boundaries of appropriateness have become blurred.

Standards may change, but the job of parents hasn't altered. Whether it's teasing or swearing it's all the same. The message to get across to the next generation is – if it's offensive then choose other words or say nothing at all.

Socially-smart kids alter their language

Socially-skilled kids of all ages will adjust their language to suit the situation they are in. They may speak one way with their friends, but use a completely different vocabulary with adults. They are aware that what works with their best friend just won't cut it when in grandma's company. This awareness shows social acuity and a flexibility to adjust to different environments. It needs to be extended to all sorts of situations, including where adults and younger children are present.

They didn't hear that from me!

What do you do when you know your children swear despite your best intentions?

Don't over react. Try to work out its purpose. Children swear for many reasons, including to experiment with language; to attract your attention; to make themselves appear bigger or older than they are; and even as a challenge or expression of personal power.

Inappropriate language can also simply be a reflection of your children's peer groups. 'Everyone else swears so there's nothing wrong with it' is a common attitude of many children and young people.

Teach them that language may be appropriate in one context or be accepted by one group but it is not acceptable in every situation. While not condoning swearing, get across to children that they need to learn to control their use of language and adjust it to suit the situation they are in.



When swearing becomes a habit

If swearing has become a habit for kids, make up alternative words to replace the swear words. One family I know had replaced certain words with different fruits. They had a fruit for every situation!

Alternatively, use a penalty or fine system to make kids aware of their poor language. When you hear a family member swear, fine them an agreed amount. At the end of the week or month give the money to a worthy cause. Of course, this strategy is easier to implement when parents join in as well.

Take a long, hard look at ... er ... yourself!

It's also helpful to examine your own choice of language to judge if it is an acceptable model for your children. Yep, sometimes kids will pick up their parents' language and repeat it at the worst possible time, such as when relatives are over.

The job of adults is to develop a sense of social awareness in the next generation so they can easily navigate a variety of different groups and social situations. Teaching appropriate language use is at the very heart of teaching kids to be socially-skilled. That's something we all should swear by!

When kids swear:

1. Avoid over-reacting when your kids swear. Look for the reason.
2. Discuss with older children the concept of matching their language with the audience.
3. Nip it in the bud before it becomes habit-forming.
4. Use a penalty or fine system when kids swear in front of you.
5. Model the language you want kids to use.