



youth service bureau

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## Teens and Swearing

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Are you sick and tired of hearing your teen exclaim “What the f\*\*\*!” Does it seem like your child knows way too many inappropriate four-letter words? It can be frustrating, especially since swearing seems like the norm in today’s society.

As Judy Gruen, writer and humorist, puts it: “With vulgarities so common in our media and culture, you really can’t blame teens for following the example set by the adults around them. **But that doesn’t mean you don’t have the right -- and the obligation -- to help them clean up their acts.**”

Yes, that’s right! You as a parent have the RIGHT to help your kids clean up their act. Keep reading to learn more about why kids swear, and what you as a parent can do about it.

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### Why do kids swear?

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Kids might swear for a variety of reasons, and these reasons may also vary by age:

- They are dealing with peer pressure and are trying to “fit in” with their friends who also swear
- They might not know what it means and are experimenting with a new word
- They are trying to push their parents’ buttons or be rebellious – “how far can I go?”
- It’s an impulsive reaction to an emotion (frustration, anger, joy) – a result of their developing brain. (Research suggests the part of the brain that controls impulses doesn’t mature until adulthood!)
- It’s a normal part of their home life (they hear their parents and siblings swearing)
- They are trying to act older/more mature
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### What can I do about it?

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1. **Decide what words are acceptable, or how much is okay, while having reasonable expectations in mind.**

Swearing can be a typical part of growing up. Some teens will experiment with swearing while others will not. However, as a parent you have the right to feel safe in your home. **You can’t control what your child says *outside* the home, but you can set limits and rules *inside* the home.**

Keep in mind that while you may want to eliminate swearing 100% that might not be the most reasonable expectation for your teen. When setting limits, be more specific – is there absolutely no swearing in the home? Are they allowed to swear when around friends only? Are certain words more okay to use than others? Decide what you feel comfortable with and share this with your child.

One thing that should never be acceptable, no matter your comfort level with swearing: **swear words should NEVER be used to put-down, make fun of, or purposely offend another person.** Let your teen know that using swear words in this way is absolutely unacceptable, no matter where they are or who they are with.

## 2. Try to understand why your child is swearing.

Ask yourself, “Why is my teen responding like this?” What is the root of the problem? Are they trying to act mature? Are their friends swearing?

You may also want to ask your teen directly about his or her swearing. For example, ask, *“What is it about what I just said/what just happened that makes you want to swear at me?”* This opens communication and makes your teen feel like you are having an open discussion – NOT like they are being lectured.

## 3. You can teach your child that, depending on the place and company, swearing may or may not be appropriate.

For example, swearing when with friends may be acceptable, but swearing in front of or to an authority figure (a teacher, a police officer) is highly inappropriate and may have serious consequences (detention, a ticket, etc.).

## 4. If you swear, stop!

Kids learn through observation and imitation. If they observe you swearing, they might not see it as a big deal. Even if you have told your child not to swear, they won’t see a problem with it if you’re doing it yourself.

However, kids appreciate honesty. Treat them like the adult they want to be and come clean. Judy Gruen offers the following as a potential way to open the discussion with your child:

*“I realize that too many of us are using foul language, and it's the wrong way to speak. Even when we're angry or frustrated, speaking this way hurts us and those around us. It damages our home environment, which I want to be peaceful and loving. I apologize for setting a bad example with my own language, and I'm making an effort to improve it. I hope you'll forgive me, and I'm asking you to make the same effort.”*

## 5. Make the home a “no-swear” zone, or make “house rules” around swearing, such as the following:

- Don’t swear in front of authority figures
- Don’t swear in front of someone you don’t know very well, as you don’t know if swearing offends them. *(If your kid doesn’t seem to care if they offend someone with their language or not, then this may need to turn into a conversation about politeness, general manners, and etiquette!)*
- Don’t swear around friends unless you know that they won’t be offended and that they will find it funny
- The same rules follow for anyone under our roof – including friends!

**6. If your teen is using swear words as a way to be purposely hurtful, try consequences for swearing just as you would for any other misbehavior.**

If your teen is using swear words to blow off steam or frustration, or if they are swearing when around friends for fun, don't rush to punish them. This is a "choose your battles" moment. **However, if you notice your teen using swear words to purposely hurt or offend another person, then it is appropriate to set consequences.**

Set up expectations for your teen ahead of time. Let them know your rules, and what will happen if they break one of those rules. Then make sure to follow through on the consequences.

Some families use a "swear jar" in their homes (anyone - even a parent! - who swears must add 50 cents+ to the jar, and once the jar is full the money is donated). Other parents may restrict privileges (no car for the weekend, no TV, no cell phone, etc.).

**No matter what consequence you choose, be sure to have an open conversation with your child about his or her behavior.** Using inappropriate language to upset or offend someone is NOT acceptable.

**7. Acknowledge and praise kids when they refrain from swearing and use an alternative word.**

Kids respond well to praise and not so well to punishment. If you notice your teen using alternative words, then be sure to acknowledge that. "I am so proud of the way you handled your frustration."

**8. Help your teen develop a larger vocabulary, including alternative words for swear words.**

First of all, you can tell your child that he or she sounds unintelligent and lazy when they use swear words. There are so many other words in the English language that can be used instead!

Swear words can also lead to miscommunication because they "express both joy and sorrow," according to James O'Connor, author of "Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing" (2006). Saying, "Cut the sh\*\*" may mean, "Are you kidding me?" to one person, but could also mean, "Stop saying that" to another person.

Helping your teen develop his or her vocabulary can help them sound intelligent and may help prevent swearing. Your teen might even get a kick out of coming up with an alternative list of swear words!

**9. Build your teen's sense of self.**

"...If your teens swear out of insecurity, one powerful antidote is to look for ways to build their sense of self. **Remind them that they are simply too fine and too smart to resort to foul language.** Few teens would admit it, but they still need heaps of reassurance and love from their parents. Aside from improving their language, paying more attention to building your teens' sense of dignity and purpose will yield great benefits to them psychologically and morally" – Judy Gruen

## 10. Help your child truly understand what “cool” means.

Judy Gruen puts it best when she says, “Cool kids have confidence and self-control. **Swearing reveals the opposite temperament:** aggressive, unkind, insensitive, unimaginative, inarticulate, and out of control. Most people (even teens!) link inarticulateness with another four-letter word: dumb. And dumb is never cool. Some kids fear that if they stop swearing, others will perceive them as less cool. The fact is, other kids probably won't even notice if your teen stops swearing.”

## 11. Understand that just because your teens swear, it doesn't make them a “bad” kid.

All teens will likely try swearing at one point. Whatever their reason for swearing is, remember that it is likely a phase. By modeling appropriate language and following the other tips outline above, it is likely that your child will move beyond swearing sooner rather than later.

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## Resources

Gruen, J. (2007). *Special report #2: 10 tips to help your teens stop swearing*. Retrieved on August 18, 2014 from

[http://www.judygruen.com/images/uploads/Dont\\_Talk\\_Like\\_That!\\_How\\_to\\_Help\\_Teens\\_Swear\\_Off\\_Swearing.pdf](http://www.judygruen.com/images/uploads/Dont_Talk_Like_That!_How_to_Help_Teens_Swear_Off_Swearing.pdf)

O'Connor, J. (2006). *Cuss control: The complete book on how to curb your cursing*. Lincoln, NE: iUniverse.

Steinberg, L. (2008). A social neuroscience perspective on adolescent risk-taking. *Developmental Review*, 28, 78-106.