

What DID YOU JUST Say?

Bad language in the early years must be tackled, but it's important to do it sensitively, says **Paul Dix...**

Children have always been attracted to the power of words to cause a disproportionate reaction. But such is the prevalence of swearing in daily life, some parents have given up trying to keep the air clean for their children. In some homes the air is turned blue as swearing punctuates every exchange. Unfortunately children bring this punctuation into the nursery. So, what do you do when your otherwise perfectly behaved three-year-old starts swearing like a bricky?

Before we run away with the idea that the frequency of swearing is uniquely British, it's worth remembering that in many countries the attitude towards swearing is very different. I remember attending an end-of-term performance in a Spanish primary, where the assembled parents were told to f***ing shut up by the headteacher in front of a stage full of children. No one batted an eyelid. They barely looked up from their lunchtime wine and Fortuna cigarettes (really). Before we imagine that we're on a sinking ship of bad language it's important to retain some perspective!

Low-key response

Your response to children swearing should be swift, private and low-key. It's always safer to address swearing directly rather than ignore it and hope it goes away.

Make a public spectacle of the child and you confirm that the word has power; encouraging similar behaviour from others – and the last thing you need is to have 10 three-year-olds running around practising the f-word to see what reaction it creates! Remove the child to a quiet spot. Your response will depend on how you judge the

situation. Sometimes swear words come out by accident and aren't intended. Other swearing is reported: "My Dad says you're a right...". The accidental swearing might be smoothed over and ignored the first time (partly because you question if you actually heard it!) but twice requires a plan of action.

If you judge that the child is using the word deliberately (obviously without knowing the meaning) then instigate an immediate, discreet sanction. Try using a warning card with clear icon/image, take a minute out or move them to a different place.

It's tempting to use your redirection and distraction skills, but if the swearing is never actually addressed it can become normal, accepted and imitated. There comes a time when children need to be cognisant of their behaviour, to begin reflecting on it and taking responsibility for it. Of course, the root cause is nothing to do with them; we can only correct the symptoms.

When you speak to the child, separate the behaviour and the child.

Criticise the language and not the child's character. Through your conversation refer back to the agreed routine, the 'way we do it here' and encourage 'beautiful words'.

Changing behaviour

At the same time as managing the behaviour, make a plan to change the behaviour. Make time to speak to the child about their language. Set the language in context – bashing your finger with a hammer, not



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getting chosen for the treat, dropping your ice cream on the floor. Write down with the child the words they might use. Filter the responses as necessary! Suggest a new and exciting word that they can use to substitute the words used at home. Model it, use it, repeat it, agree to use it yourself and praise the child when they use it spontaneously. Make a clear distinction between words for home and words for nursery. Show the child that there are words that have power to make people stop and smile, words that are fun, words that provoke a more positive reaction.

Home versus nursery

It's hard to tackle behaviours that have been normalised at home.

Most children are kept away from swear words, others are exposed to them every @34***%\$ day. You can't criticise or judge what happens at home. You can barely influence it. You can, however, challenge the behaviour and teach new behaviours that are acceptable at nursery. The message is clear, "When you're here, these are the behaviours that we need to see". Keep your focus on what happens when the children are with you.

Conversations on swearing are rarely productive with parents. Few will admit that the language comes from them even though you hear them openly swearing at collection time. A defensive response is to be expected, usually: "I don't know where

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she gets that from" or "That'll be her father/mother/the TV/other children/state of the nation, etc." When you speak to parents make sure that you do it without judgement, "I heard Chianti mutter 'b****ks' when she spilt her yoghurt; I have spoken to her, maybe you could do some work with her on this?". Let them know about the problem but don't necessarily expect them to be part of the solution. After all, this is learned behaviour and learned from home.

As children grow they realise that there are different behaviours that are appropriate for different situations. Teaching new behaviours, new words and new responses is an opportunity to reinforce the idea that behaviour changes according to context.

Acting quickly, decisively and with forethought in response to swearing will give you a chance to change the behaviour before it becomes engrained. Young children don't swear to be nasty, they swear because of the role-models that surround them at home. Your own model may have to be more controlled, more obvious and definitely less blue!



Watch their mouths

Simple steps to tackling inappropriate language...

- Identify the words for children who repeat swear words as 'adult words'.
- Teach and reinforce use of substitute words that are more fun and get a more positive response.
- Initiate a praise board for the room with pictures of the children who appear on it when they speak politely. Catch the children when they get it right.
- Keep your interventions calm and subtle in front of the other children.
- Differentiate between accidental swearing and deliberate, repeated use of a word they have learned from home.
- Tread carefully when speaking to parents. Be quick to listen and slow to judge.
- Take care not to criticise what happens in the home; instead make it clear what you expect when the children are with you.
- If you feel sanctions are appropriate, make them small, immediate and reflective; consider swift removal from the group for short time and use the same routine every time.
- If the child has many words that are undesirable, tackle one or two at a time. Be specific or the message will be lost or confusing.