

## **Inappropriate Verbal Behavior** **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

“Hey Mom, why does that man have hair growing out of his ears...oooooh that’s yucky!” is enough to make you want to melt into the concrete. Yep, kids say the strangest things, and, at the most embarrassing times!

Last month we dealt with inappropriate actions such as kid nose-picking, eating food off of the floor, and purposefully making bodily function noises. This month I’m focusing upon inappropriate verbalizations. I don’t know which are worse—the gross actions or the embarrassing stuff that comes out of the little darlings’ mouths—but hopefully these suggestions will help to keep this down to a dull roar in your home.

### **The Verbal Stuff**

Okay, here goes—let’s take a look at the types of verbal stuff that kids can come up with that makes you just want to disappear:

**Nasty language.** Depending upon the age of the child, the stimuli for the bad language and what you should do about it differ. Potty language is a fact of life—almost all children go through a stage of emitting inappropriate words at one or more stages of development. There are three phases of using bad language that many children go through: around the second birthday (during early language acquisition), beginning in late preschool (at four or five years of age and progressing into grade school) and during the teen years. Using bad language is a normal, yet embarrassing to the parent, activity that is generally easier to curb the younger the offender.

#### *Two- Year -Olds:*

The two-year-old uses profanity or bad language usually due to imitation of the parent or an older sibling. At this young age most kids are in the phase of language acquisition where mimicry is a common occurrence. You may feel proud when your daughter finally puts three words together in a descriptive phrase, but cringe when the little angel utters an expletive. Where did she get that four-letter word? Most likely from you! She’s been listening to and copying your speech for months, and has probably been rewarded for doing so by your hugs and kisses. So what’s up when you get angry and recoil in embarrassment when she blurts out “damn it!” when she knocks over her tower of blocks? Sure doesn’t seem fair to her that you reward some utterances but get angry with others!

Knowing that your little one will imitate just about anything that she hears coming out of your mouth should put you on red alert. Be careful what you say, especially in anger, as you just may hear it again from her, and perhaps in public. Breaking yourself of swearing may seem a daunting task, but as with any negative habit consistent attention to your behavior can curtail offensive words. Remember, it’s better to avoid initiating her swearing behavior than to have to curtail an existing problem—so try to train yourself to exclude profanity from your own vocabulary before she even picks it up.

But, if the kid has already been exposed to bad language and is beginning to use it in an experimental, imitating fashion the best tactic is to try to ignore it. That includes not showing your surprise or anger, or even laughing at the utterance. All of these reactions are attention-givers, and with most kids receiving attention for a behavior usually increases its future frequency. So, try to ignore the inappropriate language and it will cease if it is not reinforced by yourself, other adults, or siblings (who may think that their little sister's "damn it!" is the cutest thing). Sometimes, though, a short, simple explanation that the swear word is inappropriate may make sense to the two or three year old and can curtail the issue without too much attention being given to the offensive behavior.

### *Preschool and Grade Schoolers*

As we've seen, the swearing behavior of two-year-olds is not intentionally provocative, but the potty language of the preschooler or grade schooler definitely can be purposefully shocking. These kids may hear offensive words at school, home, playing with friends in the neighborhood, or at the movies. Nasty language is not difficult to find and many kids think that using it is either cool, attention getting, grown-up, an "in your face" maneuver, or just plain funny.

Calling someone a "poo-poo head" is universal on playgrounds throughout the country. Kids seem to be obsessed with toileting language and bodily fluids, and most have experimented with using these as descriptors. Calling someone a "snotty face" really gets his or her attention as the kid visualizes what that really would look like! Swearing and bad language are normal kid behaviors, but no matter how normal they are, the utterances can be humiliating and anger provoking to parents and teachers.

What to do if your preschooler or grade schooler gets into the habit of uttering swear or potty words? First, put it into perspective—most likely he's just trying to be cool, or imitating what the kids at school are saying. Or, if he's in a rebellious stage, the "You're stupid, you can't make me!" or the "hell with it" comment may be directed at getting you angry or involved with him. As with the little kids, it's best to try ignoring the nasty language if it just seems to slip out and he's almost as shocked as you are at the utterance. If that's the case, just redirecting his attention may work. However, if the bad language has become a bit of a habit you may wish to attach a negative consequence to it. In this way he'll better remember that swearing or inappropriate language is not acceptable and he'll work on improving his vocabulary.

The child, though, who purposefully swears in order to show who is really the boss or to intimidate parents or peers is a horse of a different color. The basis for the bad language is most likely a symptom of another problem—perhaps poor self-concept, feeling left out at home, believing parents to be unfair, or just not making it socially with the kids on the playground. If this is the case with your child, sit down and talk it over—try to ascertain why the youngster is so angry, fearful or rebellious. Try to work out a plan of action that reinforces good behavior that your child will be proud of, rather than having to resort to bad language in order to gain attention or shock value. Your child will appreciate your time and effort to get him or her over this emotional hurdle, and may not have to resort to bad language in the future.

## *Teenagers*

Kids at this age know when they are using inappropriate language, and do so either out of subconscious habit, or purposefully in order to fit in with their cohorts who are also swearing like a sailor! If you find the behavior to be offensive, let the culprit know what expletives are acceptable in your home, and which ones are not. Many times in therapy at my office I'll help a family develop a list of appropriate words that may be used in the home. Some may be of the four-letter variety, but these are deemed to be acceptable by Mom and Dad. If anyone (including parents) utters a swear word then the offending party must put money in the "dollar jar". At the end of the month the family uses this to go out to dinner, a movie, or another type of excursion. Even though the family members benefit from the dollar jar field trip, no one likes having to cough up fifty cents or a buck for every swear word uttered! This is a great way to curtail Dad's slip-ups and Mom's inappropriate language when frustrated. It teaches kids that their folks will literally put their money where their mouth is, and not be hypocritical by cursing but not allowing swearing behavior by the children.

Even if you get the bad language down to a dull roar in the house, don't expect that your teens will be swear-free when with their friends. Most teens frequently use curse words at school, when out with their friends, or shooting hoops on the courts. It comes with the territory and is a difficult habit to break when surrounded by others who may use more four-letter words than verbs. If you happen to overhear your child swearing in front of her friends—don't be surprised. It may be best to let it go if it doesn't get out of hand, and to focus upon cleaning up her verbal behavior at home. Remember, with teens it's usually best to carefully pick your battles—you don't want to win this one only to lose the war!

**Biting.** Having your toddler or preschooler chomp down onto the forearm of your best friend's son is not only frightening, but it's really embarrassing. What kind of parent raises a kid who bites his or her buddies? Well, just about any parent, as this type of behavior is not as rare as you may think!

Many little ones go through a biting phase in their early development. Although not unheard of in four and five year olds, many seasoned biters tend to be preverbal (one year olds) or just verbal (two and early three year olds). Most biters seem to outgrow this behavior when they can use their words to express their needs and feelings, rather than depending upon their teeth to get the job done.

Experts suggest that biting often begins as an exploratory behavior ("Wonder what it would feel like to dig my choppers into Jason's leg or to bite the hand that feeds me?"). If the child is rewarded by a significant reaction (Jason's crying or Mom's squealing), the initial exploratory nibble may evolve into a full-blown behavior problem occurring both at home and at preschool. Kid behavior that is given attention tends to reoccur, even if the adult perceives the attention as negative rather than as rewarding.

Besides getting a reaction from others, why else do little kids bite? Researchers suggest several reasons: simple tactile exploration, expression of anger, or feelings of control and

power over others. Some even posit that biting behavior can be the child's claim to ownership of a coveted toy or even a person. One consistent finding, though, is that biting behavior tends to decrease as children become not only more verbal, but have picked up a few alternative social skills to use to get their needs met. It makes sense that if your two year old can ask Jason for the block rather than relying on the ol' bite, snatch and grab routine, Jason will want to play longer and won't feel the need to retaliate.

Also, as kids mature they begin to become more sensitive to how their behavior affects others, both positively and negatively. Often, little ones have difficulty making the distinction between living beings and inanimate objects. Indeed, most parents have experienced their children dragging their teddy around the house by the foot or regularly chewing the hand of a beloved doll, almost in an absent-minded fashion. This is unintentional aggression, and the chewing or biting behavior may be more habit than intention. However, just spending a few mornings at a preschool will convince you that some kids do bite purposefully—the coveted block is relinquished when its user's hand is bitten or the teacher's wrist gets nailed as she's trying to place the biter in the time-out chair. What's a parent or teacher to do?

Regardless of whether your child's biting behavior is unintentional or purposeful it's important to try to teach her that biting really hurts. But, please don't bite back just to get your message across! The most common reaction to being bitten is to bite or to smack the child. Although retaliation will definitely get your kid's attention, the wrong lesson may be taught. There are more civil and effective ways of letting your child know that biting is inappropriate. First, respond with a firm "NO!" as you remove the child's mouth from your body part. Keep your verbalization short and simple. "Don't bite me...that hurts and you are not allowed to do that!" may get the message across. I suggest to my clients that the "NO!" must be said firmly, and that close eye contact is established. This usually makes the perpetrator think twice before clamping down on your fingers again!

If you're dealing with a dyed-in-the-wool biter and this approach is less than effective, further consequences are in order. Try placing the child for time-out in a chair, on the bottom step, in a corner, or for a two or three year old—in the bedroom. Kids generally dislike isolation and the time-out experience should reinforce that biting results in less parental or teacher attention, not more.

If plans A or B don't work, then you may have to play hard ball with the kid. I've often suggested squirting the offending party's mouth with a breath spray, as little kids' taste buds are not yet mature, and most breath sprays are perceived as yucky. Teachers usually like this technique, as they can keep a small spray tube in their pocket and utilize it quickly and effectively. Most kids will not bite again if they know that they'll be squirted! If you choose to go this route, be sure that the spray that you purchase is approved by your child's pediatrician and is safe to use with a small child.

Probably the best way to deal with biting behavior, though, is to prevent it from happening in the first place. Try to determine if there is a pattern to your son's biting. In

what situations does it occur most often—at school or home, when tired or wired, with close pals or only with new kids? Many children bite when over-stimulated, and you may find that a few minutes of quiet solitary play will give your son back the self-control necessary to play with others more appropriately.

In addition to considering restricting your son's environment while he's going through the biting phase, it's also wise to teach him some pro-social actions. After saying "NO!" to aggression, follow up (remember—short and simple) with a behavioral suggestion such as "I know that you want to play with Jason's blocks—let's ask him if you can and if not, we'll play with the cars." Repeatedly teaching your child an alternative technique to get his needs met will eventually teach him to use his words rather than his teeth or other aggressive maneuvers. It may not work overnight, but neither do many behavior-changing tactics. Kids can be stubborn and ornery, and may need several go-rounds before they get the message.

Not to fear, though. Your child's biting behavior, although embarrassing and perhaps nonsensical, will pass. Biting is not so much a predictor of future behavior problems as it is descriptive of his emotional immaturity. Help him to get through this stage of development by providing close supervision, removal from over-stimulating situations, firm "NO'S", or negative consequences such as time-out or loss of privileges. Don't worry—he won't bite his third grade teacher when frustrated—that would not be cool. But, he will probably retaliate in some other, quirky fashion. Just think of what you have to look forward to!

**Insensitive Comments.** Most parents have had the unfortunate experience of a child blurting out something along the lines of, "Mom, Dad, look at how fat that lady is!" or "How come Grandpa has hair growing out of his nose AND his ears?" Now, what do you do with that stuff? After picking yourself up off of the floor, you need to clarify some values issues with your kid. Any child that is old enough to string that many words together in a sentence is also mature enough to learn that words can hurt, and that we are all responsible for what we say and the effect that our words have upon other people. As soon as you can, tell your child that all people are different and that we must respect those differences. Whether it's someone of a different religious or ethnic origin ("Why is that lady wearing a cloth over her face?"), an individual with a disability ("Look, that boy is in a wheelchair."), or is unique in some other manner, this is a good teachable moment for your child.

First, explain what the difference consists of. For example, your child may not understand why individuals of different faiths have different customs. Often when kids comprehend the difference they are respectful in the future. Next, tell your child that it's more appropriate for these types of questions to be asked in private, not in front of the person who is perceived as being different. Kids are curious about people and the world around them, but they can have their curiosity satisfied by your explanation, without embarrassing themselves, you or the person in question. Finally, let your children know that if you ever suspect that they are guilty of teasing or negative statements intentionally meant to hurt others' feelings, then there will be repercussions. Discuss how they would

probably feel if embarrassed, stared at or ridiculed. And, please watch your own behavior in this regard. If you tend to comment in a derogatory fashion upon others' weight, speech or differences in customs then most likely so will your children.

If the perpetrator of the embarrassing comment is a toddler, please keep in mind that most little ones do not realize that what they are saying is rude. Most likely the child is curious about the new person and is trying to understand why they are different. Answer the youngster in a kind, yet matter-of-fact manner. "People come in all sizes and shapes...yes he is very tall, much taller than you or I", should suffice.