

## Swearing: school-age children

**It can be quite a shock when your child starts to swear. You might be wondering where your child learned that kind of language – and whether she really understands what she’s saying. How you react to your school-age child’s swearing now will influence her future swearing behaviour.**



### Swearing: why do school-age children do it?

Young children often swear because they’re exploring language. They might be testing a new word, perhaps to understand its meaning.

When school-age children swear, it’s usually to vent some negative feelings. It’s a response to something painful, upsetting or frustrating.

Children might also swear to fit in socially. They might be trying to be part of the group, or to stand out by being funny or adding shock value to their talk. Children might also be imitating others when they swear.

Some children swear because it gets a strong reaction from their parents.

### What to do about swearing: immediate action

**Speak to your child about his choice of words**, rather than ignoring his behaviour. Your child might or might not fully understand a swear word’s meaning. But school-age children do understand that words can hurt or offend others.

Your reaction will influence whether your child swears again. **Stay calm** and explain clearly that the word your child used is not acceptable. This will go a long way towards preventing future swearing.

### Should you explain what the word means?

School-age children can get some good from a simple explanation. If you think your child might have some understanding of the meaning of the word, you can ask her what she thinks the word means. Then use general terms to explain why it’s not appropriate. For example, you could say, ‘That is a word for private body parts. We don’t use it like that in our family’.

### What to do about swearing: the longer term

- It’s a good idea for the adults in your home to discuss and agree on acceptable language. For example, in some families, expressions such as ‘Oh my god’ are OK, but other words are not.
- Discuss your family rules about acceptable language with your child. For example, you could say, ‘Please speak politely or don’t speak at all’, or ‘There are some words we don’t use in our home’.
- You might also explain to your child that some words that are acceptable at home might not be acceptable at school (or other settings such as church or other children’s homes). Different places have different rules.
- If you find it difficult to stop swearing yourself, try to find alternative words to use or another way to deal with the situation. Adults often swear when they’re frustrated or angry. Instead of swearing, try to say something like, ‘I feel really frustrated or angry’. This way you’re modelling better ways of expressing feelings. If your child has heard you swearing, it can also help to explain why you were swearing.
- Be aware of what your child watches, listens to and plays with. That means supervising and checking the ratings on [TV](#), [movies](#) and other multimedia and music. Our [child-friendly movie reviews](#) can help you decide what movies and DVDs are suitable for your child. It’s also a good idea to have the [computer](#) and TV in a part of the house where you can easily see them.
- **Praise** your child when you notice him dealing more appropriately with anger or frustration. For example, if your child tells you that a playmate was using swear words to tease him, praise your child for walking away from the situation and not using those words himself.

- Your child will hear words out in public that you've said are unacceptable. It's good to be prepared for this situation. If your child asks you why somebody is using a bad word, you could talk about how people in different families have different rules.



Children who hear swear words often can get used to them. This makes it more likely the children will use these words themselves.

### Tackling swearing by dealing with the cause

If you know why your child is swearing, it can help you decide on an appropriate response.

- If the swearing is because of anger, you can teach your child that angry feelings are OK. But it's better for your child to express her feelings using more appropriate words, or to get away from what is making her angry. For example, if your child is angry with a playmate, tell her to walk away or ask an adult for help with the situation.
- If you think your child is swearing to fit in socially, discuss other ways he can get acceptance from his friends. For example, think of another 'cool' expression he can use. As children get older it's good to remind them that they can use different language for different people – but that some words are never acceptable.
- If the swearing is because of frustration, talk your child through the steps to sorting out problems for herself. For example, if she's trying to tie her shoelaces, suggest she starts by crossing the laces under each other, then makes the bows, and so on.
- Teach your child alternative ways to deal with anger and frustration. This could include counting to 10, taking deep breaths, or talking about angry feelings.
- Encourage your child to use alternative words that aren't offensive. For example, you could suggest, 'flip' or 'shivers' or even funny words that you and your child make up together.

### When your child pushes the boundaries with swearing

Some children will keep pushing the boundaries after being told not to. If you find yourself in this situation, you could try the following strategies:

- Clearly state the rules. For example, say, 'We use polite language in this family'.
- Tell your child what the **consequences** will be if you hear swear words – for example, **time-out** or **loss of privileges** such as TV time or pocket money and so on.
- Praise your child for not swearing in situations where he normally would. Or if he has gone a long time without swearing, tell him how proud you are that he has used manners and lots of polite language.
- If your child's swearing is abusive and directed at others, clearly state that you won't tolerate this kind of behaviour. School-age children should understand about hurting others' feelings.



If swearing is one of several inappropriate behaviours that your child shows, you might consider seeking help from a child health professional such as a **psychologist** or school counsellor. Your child's school or your GP might be able to recommend someone in your area.

### Where did my child hear that word?

Children pick up swear words from many sources, outside and inside the home.

But not all children learn from their parents. Research suggests that exposure to swear words on **TV** can lead to an increase in swearing in children. **Friends and peers** will also influence your child. Children will pick up new words as their social circle expands to include playmates, school friends and older children.



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### **Last updated or reviewed**

13-08-2015

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