



# Parent pages

RESOURCES FOR CHRISTIAN PARENTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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## Put the lid down on potty-mouth

Think back to when you were eagerly awaiting your baby's first word. The biggest question then was whether he would say "Ma-ma" or "Da-da." So how did we get from that to the kinds of words usually spelled with asterisks? Is this merely an innocent child mimicking what has been heard, or is it a sign of a future shock jock?

**"From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (James 3:10a).**

Children are hard-wired to learn language. They listen to words and try them out to see if they work. This is how they can progress from non-speakers to fluent talkers in a short three years. They do not know the power of a word until they see the distress it can cause. They have to hear it from someone else first, and that someone is usually an important person in their life. That is why elementary teachers sometimes defined the word *etymology* as tracing the origin of the four-letter word back to the parent of the child who said it.

Once children have reached the age where peer influence is stronger than parental influence, they may use four-letter words in order to fit in, to show they are tough or mature, or as a way of expressing anger or disgust. At this point, their motive for using such language pretty much matches that of adults.

**The best way to deal with bad language is to model good language ... Remember to teach language through Bible reading and prayer.**

**"But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person" (Matt. 15:18).**

Regardless of whether the motive



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is to develop language or to impress peers, inappropriate language should not be ignored. Our words tell others what is in our heart, and we are to be a witness at all times. The key is in how parents respond. React with horror and you will give the word more power. Instead, say, "Tell me about that word and why you chose to use it." Then you will discover if your child actually knows the meaning of the word and also encourage a sense of discernment regarding word choice.

With younger children, it is good to explain how people react to objectionable words. Teach them the difference between words that invite friends and words that invite anger. Young children are just beginning to understand how they can influence the feelings of others. This way, you are teaching compassion as well as appropriate language.

For older children, the discussion can be more complex. It is still recommended that you ask about the word and why it was used. Be sure your older child understands that words have power and may elicit a response they were not

intending. If you can get at the motive behind the use of the words, you can work with your child to replace that behavior with something more constructive. If she is using this language to express anger, she needs to learn a better way. The discussion of word choice is a good way to accomplish this goal. If your child is using this kind of language as a way of impressing people, then he needs to plan better ways to do this also. This is an important conversation, as often children are drawn into unsafe activities to fit in or impress. Alternative strategies for bad language can be used in other situations too.

**“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).**

The best way to put an end to potty-mouth is to draw a large boundary around it. Talk with your children about how the use of objectionable slang is lazy language. Provide them with appropriate words to use to express anger or surprise. Talk about other objectionable words and phrases, such as “shut up” or “stupid.” These words, while not obscene, indicate contempt and are not appropriate ways to handle a situation. These kinds of conversations will not only improve discernment and vocabulary but also will teach empathy for the feelings of others.

The best way to deal with bad language is to model good language. If you slip up, stop, admit it, and apologize. Ask for and acknowledge forgiveness. When you hear others use unacceptable language, avoid statements of judgment. Instead, take the opportunity to discuss a better way for that situation to be handled. In this way, your example of good judgment will make a stronger impression than the model of regrettable language just experienced.

For children (or adults in the family) who have developed a bad habit with particular words, a long-term program is in order. It would be reasonable to limit media time, such as television, computer, video games, as these tools are frequently the source of inappropriate language. A job jar



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might also be a good technique; anyone uttering a banned word has to stop what they are doing and chose a job to be completed. For very young children stuck on a bad word, some time alone in their room without toys or other entertainment would work to discourage this behavior. The careful choice of words is a part of what we do to live in harmony with others.

Remember to teach language through Bible reading and prayer. In these activities, faith develops along with vocabulary. God will see to it that the words of Scripture are the ones on the tips of the tongues of His children.

## For further study:

Some more thoughts on children and swear words:

<http://tinyurl.com/3cxjpw3>

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