

## Cross Words

Getting children to consider the language they use can be a useful strategy for reducing swearing in schools. Márianna Csóti raises some discussion points

There have been considerable changes in the use of bad language since swearing was introduced first on the radio with 'arse' in 1936 and in television with 'f-' in 1965.

Although hearing these words broadcast were undoubtedly shocking at the time, today very offensive language is being used even by children starting primary school.

Bremerton (Washington) High School, in the USA, started a 'Dare Not To Swear!' campaign whereby more than 1000 pupils and staff signed a pledge to give up using swear words. Part of its success was that it was student led. (For more information, follow the link at the end of this article.) Wednesfield High School, near Wolverhampton in the UK, introduced a 'zero tolerance' policy on swearing and staff found that both discipline and behaviour improved as a result. Below are some discussion questions and activities with guidance for teachers to use to help address the issue of swearing in schools.

### Discussion questions

- How would you like to be treated by other pupils in the school? (With kindness, respect, consideration, concern, sympathy and understanding.)
- What does it mean to be treated with consideration and respect? (Being treated with respect means people treat you as though you have worth or value. Being treated

with consideration means people think about your needs and try to meet them in a kindly manner. These are very positive ways of dealing with other people.)

- What is good about being treated in these ways? (They create a sense of being cared about and raise self-esteem.)
- To get other people to treat you in positive ways, how do you think you should treat them? (If you treat other people with respect and consideration you are more likely to command respect and consideration in return.)
- What is swearing? (Swearing is using profane language which is language that debases anything that should be held in reverence - such as someone's religion - or in respect, or is said as an act of aggression. It includes racist and sexist remarks and words that are derogatory to any group of people such as people with physical or mental disabilities.)
- What are the consequences of swearing? (You might lose friends and the respect of other people, including your teachers; your parents might feel hurt and disappointed that you are using offensive language; you might be so used to swearing that you find it hard to stop even when it matters; you don't look for alternative ways in which to settle disputes or differences of opinion; you retain a limited vocabulary as you have never stretched yourself to find more appropriate and apt language; and you might lose your job at some time in the future for swearing.)
- Do you enjoy spending time with children who swear? If so, why? Is it that you feel cool and part of a gang? Could you feel cool without swearing?

- If you had a choice regarding spending time with someone completely new, would you choose that person to be someone who swears, someone who never swears – or wouldn't you mind either way?

### **Class investigation**

Invite the children to tell you all the swear words and phrases they know and write these on the board.

*For primary age children* ask them to put the swear words and phrases into three columns: highly offensive, fairly offensive and mildly offensive. Find out what percentage of the class has had words from each of these columns used on them – and what percentage of the class has used words from these columns.

Discuss whether the use of these words is treating people with respect. How have they felt when swear words have been used on them? (They might have felt angry, scared, humiliated, belittled, shamed, hurt, threatened or embarrassed.) Swearing can be used as a bullying weapon. Even when friends swear to each other, it can be hurtful and being sworn at can damage self-esteem.

*For secondary age children*, ask them whether they know what any of the swear words mean. What are the dangers of using words when they don't know what they mean? (The person sworn at might understand what the words mean and either end a relationship or strike back in anger – or they might tell an adult what was said getting the person into a great deal of trouble.) How have they felt when people have used swear words on them? Are there some swear words that the children feel should never be used whatever the circumstances?

## Why do people swear?

How many reasons can the children think of for someone swearing? Have any of these reasons applied to them? (Suggestions with further discussion points below.)

*Some people swear to make them feel part of a group.* But why should they feel they have to do something that is potentially harmful to them and their relationships just to fit in? Should the other members of the group expect another friend to follow suit? Would they penalise that person for being different by not swearing? If so, what does that say about them? Have they a right to control how someone else behaves? Is that something to be proud of? Is it not better to allow each group member to grow in their own way and have one another be supportive of their choices?

*Some people swear because it makes them look tough.* But why do they feel the need to look tough? Is it because someone is bullying them? Or because they want to earn their peers' respect and admiration through appearing tough? Are there better ways to earn respect and admiration? Can they think of any? (They could act as protector and stand up in an inoffensive way for any child that is picked on or befriend children who need help.)

*Some people swear because their parents swear* and because their parents don't mind that they swear too. But is it helpful to model their parents' swearing?

*Some people swear because they like the sound of the words or they think it's funny or they want to shock other people.* Mindlessly copying words other people use without thinking about the consequences for themselves (people might think less of them for using offensive language) and for other people (who might feel hurt, offended or angry) is not positive behaviour. It is very dangerous to use words on people if the user does not

know the meaning of them – they might not be able to gauge the other person’s reaction and they could get physically hurt.

*Some children swear to bully other children.* This is negative behaviour. If they have heard swear words used in this context, what should they do? (They should tell the person to stop being nasty to the child and tell an adult should the behaviour continue.)

*Some people swear because everyone around them swears.* It is good for children to think for themselves and decide whether they should be modelling other people’s negative behaviour – is there anyone else they can use for a role model? Would they like to provide positive role models for younger children?

*Some children with Tourette’s syndrome have vocal tics* over which they have little, or no, control - they can sometimes suppress or delay them but the tics are irresistible behaviours and so cannot be suppressed or delayed indefinitely, if at all. Some vocal tics involve frequently shouting out offensive words or derogatory comments. However, sometimes children with Tourette’s deliberately swear using their diagnosis as an excuse. These children could discuss the inappropriateness of displaying pretend tics.

### **When do people swear?**

Ask the children when do people they know swear (suggestions below). Which of these groups do they fit into, if any?

- Some people only swear when under extreme pressures or when they are very angry or when they’ve made an enormous mistake. They might not swear at any particular person; they might just let out a single word.

- Some people are very quick to get angry and will swear freely at someone who has annoyed them.
- Some people swear freely in most sentences as it has become part of everyday language for them.

### **What are the alternatives to swearing?**

What could be done to stop people swearing in each of the above categories? Here are some suggestions:

- People who swear only occasionally and let out a single word could replace that single word or phrase with something innocuous that is unlikely to offend anyone in hearing. For example: 'Oh, dear!' or, 'Oh no, how could I have done that?' or, 'How on earth did that happen?' or, 'I don't believe it' or, 'Oops.' Very occasional swearing by adults in private does not pose a problem for their employers, their clients or their children. If very young children want to use a special word, they can make up one such as, 'Bibbybop'.
- People who direct swear words at other people could learn to control their anger and control how they handle the situation – and bite back any offensive words they may be tempted to use. It is no good swapping another word for a swear word when it is directed at someone because calling someone else any name other than their own can be aggressive – especially if starting the sentence with: 'You...'
- People who swear freely in most sentences could find appealing adjectives to use in place of the swear words – which is much more creative.

## Handling anger and frustration skilfully

How could the children respond – without swearing - in the following scenarios?

(Suggestions are given below.)

- Someone deliberately bumps into you. *That hurt and I'd like an apology.*
- Someone you barely know calls you a rude name. *Why did you say that?*
- Someone shows you a mouthful of chewed food. *Go away. That's disgusting.*
- Someone calls you names and swears at you. *Don't talk to me so disrespectfully. Do you know what the words you used mean?*
- Someone breaks your confidence by telling the class what you told him. *I feel sad you've told what I told you in confidence. I'll never trust you again.*
- A teacher tells you to copy up all your missing work by next lesson. *When everyone has homework they all need their books so I can't borrow one to copy from. Could you give me more time please?*

## Class debate

Ask for two volunteers to take sides in the debate and ask the class to divide into two so that each half assists one cause. After the debate, have a vote as to whether the school should ban swearing. However, if the children were to vote in favour of having a swearing ban, you need to consider whether this is a step the school is prepared to take as, initially, it would involve hard work and commitment from all staff members. How would it be implemented? And how could the children win over their peers in other classes or years to accept the new ruling?

Here are some points the speakers could make:

<b>Arguments for a ban on swearing</b>	<b>Arguments for allowing swearing to continue</b>
Swearing can increase the conflict between two people.	Swearing helps release anger.
Too many people get hurt by swearing through knee-jerk reactions to an upsetting event.	Swearing can let someone know in an instant that you are upset about something.
Swearing encourages violence as it is aggressive. People will forget how to be nice to one another.	Swearing is acceptable these days and the school should move with the times.
Younger and younger children are using words that are deeply offensive. They need better role models.	The use of language changes throughout the centuries. This is just another language shift.
If pupils and staff don't swear the school will be a more pleasant place to spend time.	People should get tough and not let swearing bother them.
Friendships can break up through hurtful things being said.	Words can't actually hurt – and everyone uses them.
The culture of the school would change and everyone would become more respectful. Classes would be less disruptive as people would be more likely to consider the consequences of their actions.	Through swearing you gain respect from your peers.
Getting used to not swearing increases your chances of a good reference on leaving school – and keeping your job when you've left school.	It would be too hard to change everyone – swearing is here to stay.
Not swearing will help the lives of any children you may have. They won't be taught at home to swear.	My parents don't mind me swearing – so why should anyone else?
Not swearing would make people search for more appropriate words and the standard of written and spoken English would improve for everyone. They would be much more articulate.	It is easier to swear than to try to manage anger.

## Being creative

Ask the children to be creative in producing anti-swearing posters and in developing ideas for use in assembly and at home. Here are some suggestions:

- Think of occasions when you swore and find alternative comments to make – use your imagination and a Thesaurus or dictionary to help you. You could either describe the situations with their corresponding comments or you could perform the situations as role plays with a friend to show off your mature responses.
- Make up a poster illustrating the consequences of swearing.
- Make up a poster showing reasons why it would be good to quit swearing.
- Write a poem about swearing.
- Write a rap about swearing.
- Produce sponsor forms for you and your friends to raise money for a charity (or a school trip) by not swearing for a week.
- Introduce a swearing box at home (parents have to pay more than you do). You could donate the collected money to a chosen charity.

To conclude, whatever strategies you choose to employ, children need a safe ‘space’ for discussing their feelings and sharing the emotions that lie behind their actions. In a society that’s experiencing increasing violence among young people, working towards reducing children’s aggression by making them think harder about the language they use – and, hopefully, modifying it where necessary – can only be a good thing.

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