When Children Use Swear-Words in the Classrooms

Listening to a young child use “adult” swear words can be a shock. Swearing is a challenging issue, because children do it for so many reasons, and because adults have so many different feelings about it. Many of you have asked what we do at school when we hear children swear or call other people names.

Swearing is a common phenomenon in preschools. It can be a very complicated issue in a school where so many families come together. Some of our families don’t mind if their children try out swearing. Some adults swear themselves, but don’t want their children to do it. Other families carefully avoid using this language, and don’t want their children exposed to it. Children may hear swear words around town, or in movies or TV shows (even ones advertised as children’s shows). While preschoolers rarely know the meaning of a swear word or understand the negative consequences of using it, they do understand that the words can have a powerful effect on other people. We all want our children to learn positive ways to express themselves, rather than the hurtful and offensive messages given by swearing.

Young children use swear words in many ways, so our response in the center depends on how we see this language being used. Some children like to use words that sound silly to them and make others laugh. With these children, we help them think of fun words that do not hurt anyone’s feelings. Four and five-year olds enjoy inventing new words, or changing the words in familiar books and songs. For them, swearing is a part of exploring language, so we focus on providing other, more positive language experiences.

Other children use swear words when they are angry. Sometimes, these children have been sworn at and teased themselves by adults of other children. We work with these families to stop this destructive pattern. More often, children who swear in anger are children who used to solve problems by hitting, or other kinds of physical aggression. We have told them over and over that they should use words instead of hitting. It’s not surprising that when they stop themselves from hitting, they choose to imitate the angriest words they have heard. Unlike swearing in older children, young children’s swearing can be a sign that they are learning more self-control. In these cases, we let children know that they must solve their problems with words that are not hurtful. We help them find more acceptable words to express their feelings and desires, and better ways to solve whatever problem is upsetting them.
Some children like to watch people react to swearing. Preschoolers are fascinated with how adults behave, and swearing gives children a powerful way to make adults show strong emotions. In these situations, we try to ignore the swearing and find more enjoyable topics for conversation. This usually takes away the power of swearing. We also provide challenging activities that help these children feel powerful in other ways. Making up stories with powerful characters, building large structures, digging deep holes, and participating in cooking projects and other “adult” activities, are some examples.

In all of these cases, swearing does not disappear immediately. Our experience has been that it gradually fades away as children find other interesting activities. Occasionally, the swearing increases instead of fading. As more children imitate this behavior, it becomes a common way to deal with problems. This can make some children and adults feel that the school is not safe or that it is not welcoming to them.

Over the years, after discussions with parents and among the staff, we have realized that it helps if we are consistent. The problem-solving approach to swearing involves:
1) honoring the impulse and describing in non-judgmental language
2) empathizing, i.e. encouraging expression of emotions and listening actively
3) providing social information and expressing your own feelings and needs
4) problem solving, i.e. setting limits (redirection, choices, I-message) or negotiating (involving children in the problem-solving process).

Phrases like "swearing (or name calling) hurts people's feelings" and "most people don't like to hear swear words" give the child valuable social information. "How can we solve this problem without hurting anyone?" and "What other words can you use?" invite the child to participate in the process of thinking and solving the problem.

As in any other instance of limit setting, it is critical to focus our attitude and our language on the positive alternatives to swearing. Children learn best when they are told what they can do, rather than what they cannot do.

Sometimes increased attention to swearing may actually cause an increase in the behavior for a short time! However, we believe that if everyone gives clear, non-threatening, non-shaming messages about swearing, then the children will soon learn more successful ways to use the power of language.