

*Rule*  
**24**

# Let Your Kid Swear

Jillian was five years old. She knew her mother didn't like hearing the word "stupid." So she said it.

"That's not a word we use in our family," her mother said.

Jillian looked her mother in the face.

"Stupid Mommy," she replied.

No matter what word is "bad" in your family, many kids savor the shock value. They like to see you jump. Bad words are powerful words, and young kids want to experience power. Help your child learn social conventions and learn to use power wisely. You can save your ears and give kids freedom of speech—by changing the timing and location.

### *Renegade Reason*

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*Most kids love to say banned words—let them. In the bathroom.*  
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Bad words vary by family. Some make a sailor blush. Some are potty talk. In other homes, words like "stupid," "dummy," "shut up" or "boring" are banned. No matter what your tastes, you have the right to set limits on words you don't want to hear. But be wary. Complete censorship usually backfires.

"Poop!" said Ben, a five-year-old. All his friends dissolved into giggles,

and their teacher reacted spectacularly. Nearby, Emma got a mischievous glint in her eye: “Poop—poop—poop—poop—poop,” she chanted.

Censoring speech has two major problems. One is practical: You can’t control spoken words. Just as you can’t force your child to sleep, you can’t truly stop her from saying something. The other is human nature:



Banning anything creates an illicit thrill. Kids gain an extra jolt of delight when they use a forbidden word. It’s just too tempting. Besides, your reaction is bound to be exciting.

Instead, say yes to bad words. Keep your face calm. Try to give no reaction. Then offer your tot information: “That’s a word grown-ups use when they’re very angry. If you want to say that word, you need to do it in the bathroom.” By giving kids a place for free expression, the thrill of censorship diminishes.

## *Renegade Blessings*

*By allowing free speech—within limits—you can teach your child how to explore the power of speech and use it wisely.*

*I can say bad words, but it’s not that exciting. Nobody watches me.*

*I know what the bad words mean. They’re not so mysterious. There are times and places for bad words, just like everything else.*

*I know some people, like my grandmother, can get really hurt by bad words. I don’t want to hurt her.*

*When I get mad, sometimes it helps to say a powerful word. Mean words are different. It’s not OK to call names and use words to hurt people.*

### *Why It Works*

Eric was a three-year-old with an extensive vocabulary. One day he got furious at his mother and wanted to call her something awful. He summoned up the biggest word he could find and shouted, “You—you—you—*radiator!*”

Cursing is an exploration into power, say Laura Davis and Janis Keyser, authors of *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*. Younger children’s curses may be “dummy” and “poo-poo head” or even “radiator.” Older preschoolers often pick up grown-up curse words. Tim Jay, author of *What to Do When Kids Talk Dirty*, says it’s natural that preschool-age children are fascinated by bodies and potty talk, since potty training has played a big part in their young lives.

When children bring home bad words and try them out on you, they are fishing for information. “What’s an appropriate response to this word? How does this word affect people?” Young kids understand that curse words are emotionally charged. They try to figure out why the word is so special by trying it out again and again and witnessing the reaction. Sometimes a child uses a dramatic word just to get attention. Davis and Keyser suggest offering information: “If you’re trying to get my attention, you could say, ‘Mom, I really need you.’”

Stephanie Rottmayer, director at the School for Young Children, says bad words are mostly a big deal for adults, not kids. Young kids lose interest if adults don’t reward cursing with a strong reaction. “Sometimes it’s just fine for a group of kids to get together and say bad words. They aren’t hurting anybody. They are laughing and having fun together,” she says. But it’s important to give kids information so they understand who feels uncomfortable hearing those words, and what times and places are considered socially inappropriate.

## *Powerful Language*

“Bad words” fall into many categories. There are power words (swear words), body words (potty talk) and family-specific bad words (like “stupid” or “shut up”). These can be dealt with by offering freedom of speech in a limited location. Other bad words are more serious and need additional steps, including mean words (name-calling) and sexually explicit words.



### Take Off Your Adult Lenses

We ban bad words because we don't like to hear them. But speech is meant to be controlled, not censored. Lift the ban, but keep your ears happy, too. Teach her what's acceptable by giving her information and a degree of freedom. A child should be free to say anything she wants—in her bedroom or in the bathroom. There's a time and place for everything, even bad words.

## *Swear Words = Power Words*

Think about why adults curse. Why are some words vulgar and “bad” and other words good? Most of us need a few powerful words to call on when times get tough. When we smash our finger in the car door or drop our cell phone in the toilet, even the most mild-mannered mom might yell an expletive. As six-year-old Calvin says in the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, “Life's disappointments are harder to take if you don't know any swear words.” Of course, some people love casual cursing, but then the power evaporates. Swear words keep their intensity only when we hold them in reserve for times of extreme stress and anger.

Keeping that reason in mind helps us stay objective when it comes to

young kids and swearing. Because, face it, when a three-year-old shouts, “You s\*\*\*head!” we lose our objectivity. Fast. If your child says something that pushes your buttons, just walk away.

Language is generally rated PG at our house. However, my husband loses his cool occasionally, and when he does three-year-old Zach perks right up. Zach loves the intensity of his papa’s voice. He loves its power and the drama of the new words. Then he likes to try it out himself.

*If you don't want your child to swear, then don't swear yourself. Model saying “gosh,” “dang,” “fiddlesticks” and “shoot” or try out something new like “Thundercrackers!”*

One morning at our house we ran out of Rice Krispies.

“Dammit!” shouted Zach. “Oh, goddammit!”  
“Where’d he learn that?” my husband asked.

Swear words mean nothing to young kids, but children are attracted to their power. If you don’t want your child to swear, then don’t swear yourself. This strategy can work temporarily—perhaps until school age, when peers supply new data.

## ***Potty Words***

Bodies are fascinating, and many kids delight in bathroom noises and vocabulary. Potty talk is age-appropriate and often hysterically funny to kids. There is nothing wrong in allowing four-year-old friends to giggle together—it can actually be a positive form of social bonding. Most adults don’t find it half as entertaining as kids do, so be prepared to shift the conversation’s location.

For example, Deb, a teacher at the School for Young Children, set up a “Poop House” in one corner of the classroom when a small gang of kids wanted to do lots of potty talking. She delineated the area with blocks and announced, “Kids can say whatever they want in here. If you want to say poop words, say them in here.” The Poop House did its job. It gave a safe, contained area for free speech. Other kids and teachers didn’t have to hear it. The children in the Poop House laughed and laughed and had a good time together. Eventually they grew bored with the novelty and

moved on to other play. At home, you can do the same: set up a designated area where kids can get their giggles out.

### *Family-Specific Bad Words*

In one house it's "shut up." In another it's "butt." If you have words you don't like to hear, try figuring out what type of word it is. Do you dislike it because it's a mean, name-calling name? Or because it's potty talk? Model language you do want to hear and deal with "bad words" according to their type.

### *Adult Bombs*

An interest in potty talk and common swear words is natural for preschoolers, but be wary if your sweet five-year-old starts dropping truly X-rated adult words. He's being exposed to things he shouldn't. There's no way you can erase an adult word from his vocabulary (let him say it in his bedroom if he has to), but sexually explicit words, along with other warning signs, could be a sign of sexual abuse. Track down where he heard the word. If the source worries you—say, an older teen or adult in the neighborhood—investigate your child's safety.

### *Mean Words*

If Suzy calls Sarah a "stupid head," the issue is less about the word, and more about anger and hurt feelings. Don't focus on her word choice ("That's not nice, you shouldn't say 'stupid.'"). Focus on the feeling beneath the word. You might say, "You sound mad at Sarah! I wonder what happened?" Use conflict-mediation steps to sort it out.

What about when you're the target? Mean words from your child can really sting. Take a deep breath. Disregard the word and state his feelings: "You're really mad that you can't have another cookie." See more in Rule 7: "I Hate You!" Is Nothing Personal.

## Tools to Try—Add to Your Toolbox

Even if you don't swear at home, bad words will someday enter your child's vocabulary. If you don't like hearing it, here's what you can do.

### *Be Dull*

Kids love attention. If your child can get a rise out of you by saying a bad word, what fun! Stop the excitement. Be dull and calm. Talk in your regular voice and give a brief reply. If you can't calmly answer, then just walk away. Deny your child the fun of getting a reaction from you.

### *Change the Location*

When your child swears or talks about poop at the dinner table, give him an option where he can say that word. The bathroom is a great spot. Maybe your child's bedroom with the door closed or outside. Allow free expression but change the location. This method protects your rights—you don't want to hear it—but avoids falling into the trap of banned words. For example: "If you need to say that word, go into the bathroom. You can say that word as much as you want, but not at the dinner table."

### *Offer Information*

My son came home from school one day when he was five.

"I know a bad word," said Myles. He glanced up at me with a wicked sparkle in his eyes.

"What makes you think it's a bad word?" I asked.

"Katy told me not to say it."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Traction," he said proudly.

Bad words seem especially powerful when kids don't know what they

mean. And most kids don't. Words are typically censored, not explained. Little gangs of kids giggle over bad words and spread misinformation. When I was a little girl, I remember experimenting with a swear word in the car one day. My mother was silent for a moment and then told me it meant female dog. I was thoroughly disappointed. Knowing the true meaning robbed it of its zing.

When you first hear your child use a bad word, help her out. Explain what the word means (see Rule 26: Sex Ed Starts in Preschool). Tell her, "You can always ask me what any word means and I will tell you." Discuss where it might be OK to say it and who doesn't like to hear it. Take out the mystery and offer accurate information. Kids are grateful to learn more—no one likes to be embarrassed.

### *Go Scientific*

An interest in bad words may mean your child needs more information about how his body works, and what's private and what's not. Get out a book about the human body. Point out parts of the digestive system. Explain which parts of the body are private. Teach your child some new words. Tell them "butt" is short for "buttocks." What about "esophagus"? Kids love big words. Saying a big word like "esophagus" conveys lots of power. Taking the scientific approach often takes the wind out of the little jokesters' sails.

### *New Power Words*

My six-year-old swore at the breakfast table the other day. I smiled. He was trying out the power of his new swear word: "picklerash."

Encourage your child to create his own personal power word. If your child echoes the R-rated words you slip out, try this: "That's a strong word. That's Mommy's strong word when I get really mad. Do you need a strong word, too?" Help your child pick out a special word that's just her own.



Kids this age get creative, and many delight in having their own personal word. I know a whole family that used to say “Sugarjets.” Whenever my husband got mad as a boy he’d yell out “Funnelburgers!” My son Zach chose to shout “Chop! Chop!” Myles favors long words: “Picklerash,” “Blumpfenzine” or sometimes “Hippokaloric!” These words tickle kids’ funny bones and bestow great power and control. “That’s my word,” Myles will tell his father. “You can’t say it, it’s just my word. When I say ‘Picklerash,’ you’ll know I’m mad!”

Using a substitute word in another language can work, too. I met a six-year-old who swore in German when he was mad. “*Scheiss!*” he’d call out. This was his code word. Since few people in Maine understood German, he was relatively safe using his powerful swear word. Some kids love this approach because the word is “real.”

### ***Beyond Bad: Racist and Sexist Slurs***

Tread carefully if racist or other offensive slur words show up in your child’s vocabulary. They may signal danger. Exactly where did this word come from? Whose company is he keeping? Do you have concern for your child’s safety? If a slur is used in name-calling, address the conflict first, then investigate the word’s source.

Like other bad words, ignorance is often the reason, so offer information and firm social limits. For example, my son, Myles, likes to name imaginary countries. One time he named one “Nig-ger.” I told him his chosen name was already a word and explained its meaning. “That’s a very mean word for people with dark-colored skin. It’s so mean people don’t say it anymore, not even grown-ups. It hurts people very much.” Depending on your family’s racial background, you might explain it differently.

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**WORDS TO TRY**

If you need to say that word, go in the bathroom.

You can say that word as much as you want, but not at the dinner table.

Do you know what it means? I can tell you.

You can always ask me what any word means and I will tell you.

Let's talk about where it's OK to say that word and where it's not.

Sounds as if you're interested in how bodies work.

That's a word grown-ups say when they're angry.

Do you need a strong word, too? What word could you say when you get really mad?

**WORDS TO AVOID**

We don't say that word in this house.

That's not a word you can say.

Don't ever let me hear you say that word again!

Don't talk to me like that!

**OUT AND ABOUT**

Sometimes sending your child to the bathroom to spout off isn't an option. You might be nowhere near a private spot like the bathroom. One option is to find one. Move your child outside, sit in the car, find a deserted corner where your child can spout off. Another option is to impose a time delay. "You can say that word as much as you want at home in your bedroom, but not right now in the store." Kids will often comply if they realize they can still do what they want to do—just later. Wherever you are, remember to focus on feelings.