



BETWEEN A BLESSING AND A CURSE

By Jennifer Morton

Your darling says his first word; dada or mumum. How cute! Before you know it, he can name things around the house, garden and shopping centre and finally form sentences. You can now communicate with your child and even have a conversation. Then you hear it; a swear word flying out of the mouth of your beautiful, innocent baby.

Oh sh*t, where did they learn that language?!

When your child starts talking it's exciting and welcome. You encourage him and you want him to succeed. You help him to learn by pointing to different items and repeating the word over and over, hoping he'll join in.

Over time he is able to learn just by listening and you are amazed how much he actually hears. He even starts to mimic you and other people close to him. You are delighted with his progress and praise him for being so clever.

If swearing is used regularly in your home, your child is bound to repeat those words too. It's a word he hears and at a very young age he doesn't even know it's a naughty word.

Swearing, also known as cursing, cussing, profanity, vulgarity, blasphemy, bad words, or coarse and offensive language has crept into everyday usage. So much so that it's not reserved for late night television anymore.

What did you say?

We all know the main words that are highly offensive, but where do we draw the line? What about words like crap, frig or bloody?

The word bloody is widely accepted by Australians and many do not consider it a swear word. But when Tourism Australia

released an international advertising campaign in 2006 toting the phrase, 'So where the bloody hell are you?' it caused a stir around the world; particularly in Britain.

When the campaign was banned in the UK for using the word bloody, Australia's Tourism Minister at the time, Fran Bailey responded to the uproar with, 'What an absolutely, incredibly ludicrous stance and a greater example of double standards you'd never find. I just don't understand it.'

The usage of swear words in the media is increasing. It's now common for words like sh*t and b**ch to be heard on drive time radio (when your children are a captive audience) and early evening television.

Dr Victoria Whittington, Program Director and Senior Lecturer in child development at the University of South Australia's School of Education can only re-state the obvious,

'Not all television is suitable for children. Turn the TV or radio off if it contains foul language. I think people today forget that the TV has an off button.'

Cause and effect

Although swearing is quite common and tolerated more today than 20 years ago, it still invokes negative annotations. Older generations may still hold the belief that certain language is not acceptable around small children or your elders and there's a deep-seated instinct not to use it. Some adults may be so conditioned to using and hearing swear words in everyday conversation that they don't even notice it. Swear words are woven into discussions - used as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives and interjections on a regular basis.

Jane Jones, mother of three young children, says that while her six-year-old daughter does not use swear words, her five-year-old son uses vulgar expressions like 'bloody idiot' and 'kick in the nuts.'

'I do say 'stupid bloody idiot' if I'm angry or frustrated at someone or a situation. He does get it from me,' Jane admits. 'I rarely use the F word and certainly not in front of the kids, but I do say sh*t sometimes.'

Cheryl Dikas, Manager of Education and Training at Lifeworks, Relationship Counselling and Education Services urges parents and caregivers to recognize that all behavior has meaning. She says, 'Children's behavior is associated with their needs: the need to feel safe, included, heard and understood.'

Also remember that trying new words are part of a child's development.

'Children aged four to six can comprehend and understand that these are 'naughty' words and vocalizing such words helps them work out social norms and etiquette.

'Using the concept of behaviour zones, swearing would be considered red zone behaviour. Share your concerns with the child and explain why this behaviour is not tolerated,' says Cheryl.

Modern day solutions vs. old fashion punishment

Long gone are the days of soap in the mouth, right? Although this method of punishment for swearing was more popular in the first half of the 20th century, still many adults over 35 can recall the threat of soap in the mouth. Modern parenting attitudes now consider that this comes close to child abuse. In 2009, an American mother was arrested for child abuse after forcing her 8-year-old daughter to hold a bar of soap in her mouth. When the girl started vomiting her mother took her to the hospital and the staff promptly called the police.

When you hear your child swear for the first time, do not overreact with anger or laughter. Instead, observe the situation. How are they using the swear word? Are they using it to express frustration, anger or to be funny? Do they look to you for a reaction?

At first, the best response is no response at all. If a child knows that the word will cause a reaction; negative or positive, they are likely to use it again. If swearing is becoming a habit, Dr Whittington suggests calmly saying, 'We don't use that word here'. She also says that it is important not to label these words as bad. 'By labeling a word as bad or naughty, a child may think anyone who uses that word is also bad.'

Dr Whittington reminds us that children are products of their environment. 'Children will not repeat words they do not hear. If they do not hear them, they will not use them. One thing about parenting, teaching and working with young children in any form, there's a process of refining yourself and people have to be aware of that.'

If you are prone to swearing and want to change your habit, try replacing the swear word with an alternative. Charlie Brown used 'good grief' to convey his displeasure and frustration with little fallout and Steve Irwin popularized the word 'crikey', which can be used to express surprise or annoyance.

Language is an important part of communication. Introducing young children to a broad range of words through books, conversation and positive role models will instill a constructive and educated vocabulary.

Behaviour zones

Green zone - behaviour that is desired.

Yellow zone - behaviour that is not desired, but is tolerated because of the child's age or circumstances.

Red zone - behaviour that cannot be tolerated. **af**

Useful Websites

- www.lifeworks.com.au
- www.parenting.sa.gov.au
- www.raisingchildren.net.au
- www.parentingrc.org.au
- www.australianfamily.com.au