
Those Four-Letter Words

Parent reaction to four-letter words

Parent reactions to a child's use of a four-letter word range from alarm, anger and worry to embarrassment, disgust, hurt and a feeling of failure.

Obscene, profane or otherwise inappropriate four-letter words have a magical quality to most children. At a very early age children learn these words aren't like other words in their vocabulary.

These words give children a certain power – to produce a reaction in their parents. Usually, this reaction is emotional and instantaneous. Children know their parents will be upset when they say _____. No other words have this same power.

Children become fascinated with their use of a particular word. They try out the word in different settings. When certain words are forbidden, children's fascination with the word increases.

Children learn four-letter words

One mother remarked that she was horrified when her young daughter used such a word at a family reunion. "Where did she learn it?" That's difficult to say. The girl may have overheard it in a conversation. If she has an older brother or sister, or plays with older children, she may have picked it up from one of them. Some children learn four-letter words by listening to their parents or other adults in their homes.

Children repeat four-letter words used by their parents or other relatives. When they use these words at day care or in school, they are usually punished by their providers or teachers. Parents who use four-letter words must find substitute expressions. Or, they must use these words only when their children aren't present.

A child seldom knows what a specific word means. All the child knows is that the word must be important because Mom, Dad, or other adults become REALLY upset or angry. Parents need to remember that children are learning. In the beginning these four-letter words are no different from any other words. The four-letter word is heard and then used.

After using the word several times, children begin to sense something is different with this particular word. It brings a strong reaction! Sometimes parents will be very patient with children in every other aspect of learning except the use of four-letter words. A usually understanding father might punish his



young son for using a certain word. This father would never think of using that word. He reacts, however, as though he believed the child should “know” not to use it.

Techniques to stop the use of four-letter words

The child has to learn. But how should we parents cope with these verbal expressions?

Often parents feel they must punish their children. They may even resort to physical punishment. They may threaten to wash the child’s mouth out with soap. Or they may explode!

Each of these techniques may momentarily stop the use of the word. However, the child will probably use the word again. None of these methods shows any regard for the child’s feelings. They simply reinforce the idea that these words have emotional power.

A good approach is to react calmly. In this way, children won’t experience the emotional power of these words. Parents might choose to ignore a child using an unacceptable word or immediately distract the child with some different activity.

Many parents find that a very casual response such as, “We don’t use that word in our family. We say _____,” works very well. Others will say, “Mommy does not use that word. Listen to how Mommy talks.” In these examples, the parent is helping the young child learn appropriate social behavior. No importance is placed on the word and no punishment is given.

Remember to remain unemotional and casual when these situations occur. Chances are very good that the use of the objectionable word will cease.

Children are developing and learning. Many words enter their ears. When it comes to language, children are like expensive vacuum cleaners – they pick up just about everything! Our job is to help them learn to sort out what they have picked up. We can do this by being understanding and reacting calmly when a new word appears.

Source:

Adapted from the fact sheet, Those Four Letter Words, written by Dr. James E. Van Horn, Professor of Rural Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension.

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