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## I Can't Believe My Child Just Said That!

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Out of the mouth of babes you may have heard statements like these, “You stupid dummy!”; “You dirty dog!”; or “Jacob is a crybaby!” Perhaps your child has even used words never spoken in your house or within your hearing. You might be wondering, *What is going on here?*

Children learn swear words and name-calling in the same way they learn other aspects of language—by hearing it used around them. For the most part, young children don't understand the literal meanings of swear words, but they do quickly realize from adult reactions that they have power. When trying to stop this behavior, parents and teachers often unwittingly reinforce a child's behavior.

If your child uses swear words or is name-calling, I invite you to consider the following:

- Experimenting with new words is normal.
- Children are generally good recorders but are often poor interpreters, repeating words or phrases they hear without knowing the meaning.

Also, some slang words are derivatives of swear words. As adults, we understand where these words originate, but a child hasn't learned the connections yet.

For example, a child-care provider noticed a child who used swear words only when role-playing at the preschool gas station. She discovered that a gas station attendant the child knew swore all the time, and so she evidently generalized this experience and believed that all gas station attendants swear.

- Ask yourself if your child is bored or frustrated. Consider that he or she may be unchallenged by an activity and is choosing to create his or her own diversions. Or is this the best way he or she knows how to get your attention?

- Remember that the goal is to eliminate the offensive language, not label your child as “bad” or “sinful.”



- At a time when your child is not using “naughty language,” take him or her aside and in simple terms talk about it. Tell your child why you believe the words are not acceptable. Explore and practice with him or her what can be done or said differently.

- Notice when your child tends to talk this way. Is it after being with older children, or upon coming home from school, a day-care setting or someone

else's home? Talk about your concerns to other adults who interact with your child. If necessary, consider altering your child's environment if you can.

- If more than one child is involved, first focus on caring for the needs of the child who has been called a name or has been sworn at. Ignore the negative behavior of the name caller initially. It will not be helpful to shame the offensive child, especially in front of others.

- Resist making a direct connection between your child's choice of words and his or her love for Jesus, or Jesus' love for your child.

Remember, a major goal in parenting is to help your child become responsible for his or her behavior and to respect others. This is a long journey. God sets standards before you, and then lovingly and patiently He works with you as you learn. Surely we can offer the same patience to our children.

Susan E. Murray is an associate professor of family studies who teaches behavioral science and social work at Andrews University. She is a certified family life educator and a licensed marriage and family therapist.