

Triple P Tip Sheet

Primary Schoolers

Swearing

Children often learn words their parents do not like, particularly swear words. Parents need to decide which words are acceptable and which ones are not. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your child to use acceptable words.

WHAT IS SWEARING?

Swearing is using words that are rude and offensive. It can be a form of abuse directed at others, or an outburst of anger or frustration.

WHY DO CHILDREN SWEAR?

It is unrealistic to expect children never to swear. Most primary schoolers will experiment with swear words they hear others use. Swearing is likely to continue if it gets a reaction from others such as laughter, or lots of attention such as long discussions about not swearing.

When children are with their friends, they are more likely to swear. Children may swear to show they are 'tough', or to bully or threaten others. If swearing gets children what they want, it is likely to continue.

HOW TO DISCOURAGE SWEARING

▼ Set a Good Example

You cannot expect your child not to swear if you use swear words yourself. If you must swear, use words that you allow your child to say.

▼ Use Planned Ignoring

Planned ignoring is a good strategy to use the first time your child says a swear word. If your child swears, do not look at or talk to them. If swearing does not get a reaction, it may stop. However, if swearing occurs often and is becoming a problem, try the following suggestions.

▼ Plan Ahead

Parents need to agree on what they expect before talking with their child about swearing. Identify a small

number of words that you find offensive or that may be inappropriate at school or in the community. Do not allow your child to use these words.

▼ Discuss the Problem With Your Child

At a time when everyone is calm, have a talk with your child about swearing. Describe the problem from your point of view — *Angus, I don't like it when you use swear words.* List the words that you have decided are unacceptable and list some acceptable alternatives — *From now on these words are not allowed...*(list the unacceptable words) — *If you must use that sort of language, you may say...*(tell your child the acceptable words).

▼ Talk About Consequences

Decide ahead of time exactly what to do if your child swears. Suitable

consequences involve the loss of an activity or privilege, such as special games or activities, watching television or staying up late. Tell your child what consequence will apply if they swear.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO USE ACCEPTABLE WORDS

▼ Praise Your Child for Using Acceptable Words

Praise your child if they go through the whole day without swearing — *Thank you for using acceptable words today.* You may also like to reward your child with a treat such as their favourite dessert or a special activity with Mum or Dad.

HOW TO MANAGE SWEARING

▼ Tell Your Child the Problem and the Consequence

If you hear your child swear, tell them the problem — *Georgia, you're swearing. We do not use that word in this house.* Tell your child the consequence — *Because you swore, you cannot ride your sister's bike for 10 minutes. Come back then and try asking politely.* If your child swears when playing with other children, tell them to go and play by themselves for a short period of time. Say something like — *Claudia, you are not speaking nicely around others, go and play outside by yourself for 10 minutes.* Ignore protests or complaints. Do not argue or debate the point with your child. Simply carry out the consequence.

Keep to the agreement and where appropriate return the activity or privilege at the agreed time. You



may need to use consequences a number of times before your child remembers to use acceptable words.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

Your child may start telling you when other children use swear words. This can be as much of a problem as swearing. Try to act only on what you have seen or heard yourself. If telling tales continues, send the tale-teller away from the other children for 5 minutes.

KEY STEPS


- **Set a good example.**
- **Use planned ignoring the first time your child swears.**
- **Decide which words are acceptable and discuss them with your child.**
- **Praise your child for using acceptable words.**
- **Act immediately when you hear your child swear.**
- **Apply a consequence for swearing.**

IF PROBLEMS PERSIST

Here is another strategy you can try if your child has developed an ongoing habit of swearing.

- Explain to your child that they can earn points by using acceptable words. Choose a time of the day when swearing is a problem, such as between 3.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m., then break this time into smaller blocks depending on how often your child usually swears. For example, if your child swears every half hour or so, they could earn one point for every 30 minutes they use acceptable words and no swear words.
- Tell your child that the points can be exchanged for a daily reward or a larger reward at the end of the week. Decide how many points your child must earn to get the reward and what the reward will be. Tell your child what they can earn if they reach the goal.

Example Points Chart

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday
3 - 3.30pm	1	0	1
3.30 - 4pm	1	1	1
4 - 4.30pm	0	1	1
4.30 - 5pm	1	0	1
5 - 5.30pm	0	0	0
Total	3	2	4
Goal for the day	2	3	3
Reward given	yes	no	yes

- Decide what you will do if your child swears. Consequences may involve the loss of an activity or privilege as described earlier. Some families use a system of fines where any family member who swears puts money into a jar. Consider this if your child receives pocket money. For children under 10 years of age, you may choose to use time-out as an immediate consequence for swearing (see *Positive Parenting* booklet). Tell your child what consequence will apply if they swear.
- Make a chart to keep a record of points earned (see above). Stick the chart where it is easy for you and your child to see, such as on the refrigerator.
- For each time period that your child uses acceptable words, put the points on their chart. Praise your child for using acceptable words.
- If your child swears, do not give them any points for that time period. Tell your child the problem and the consequence. Carry out the consequence as described earlier.
- At the end of the agreed time, add up the number of points your child has earned. If they have reached the goal, give them the reward.
- If your child does not reach the goal, do not give them the reward. However, do not criticise them or take away points they have earned.
- When your child is reaching the goal easily, start to phase out the rewards by making them harder to achieve. Gradually increase the number of points your child must earn to get the reward. Then gradually increase the time your child must use acceptable words before earning a point, until you can take down the chart.
- Continue to use consequences consistently if your child swears.
- Continue to praise your child for using acceptable words.

FOR FURTHER HELP See the *Positive Parenting* booklet for more information on positive parenting strategies. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the service where you were given this tip sheet.

Triple P is a parenting program developed by Professor Matthew R. Sanders and colleagues in the Parenting and Family Support Centre, School of Psychology at The University of Queensland with funding support from Queensland Health, Victorian Department of Human Services, Health Department of Western Australia, and National Health and Medical Research Council.

Written by Matthew R. Sanders, Karen M.T. Turner, Carol Markie-Dadds
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