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There Is An Art To Swearing And I'm Sharing That With My Kids

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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My kids are at the age where they love testing the power of swear words.

They aren't quite screaming them in our faces yet, but they do enjoy using euphemisms to explore the words they've heard on the playground.

They're like forensics experts piecing together the scene of a crime to figure out what exactly occurred.

Who said what? What was the context? *Did they get in trouble?*

It's always a treat to hear them try and talk about the severity of words around the dinner table without actually using the words. Curiously, even though they speak in French at school and at home, the swear words are all in English.

"Mickey said the F-word today," said Sonia, age 10.

"Which one is that again?" asked Elizabeth, age 8.

“You know, the F-word,” replied Sonia.

Our youngest daughter, five-year-old Maria, helpfully held up her ring finger. It’s as close as she’s comfortable getting to actually holding up her middle finger.

Then all three did it.

And for some reason, I started to get offended.

Late writer Annette McLeod wrote about her feelings about swear words.

She was OK with her son experimenting with words — period.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/i-let-my-kid-swear>)

The Weight Of Words

“That’s a strong word,” I said. “Did Mickey get in trouble?”

“No, there were no adults around,” says Sonia. “But it made Seth really mad.”

The only way for children to truly understand the impact swear words have is by observing their impact in a real situation.

There’s no use in asking an adult about different words because they can shift meaning over time and also shift with context.

"Lessons like this reveal the strength words can have to hurt others."

“The F-word is a good example of a ‘rarely word’,” I said, “one that we don’t use very often and have to be really angry to use.”

They’ve heard me use that word when I hit a finger with a hammer or break a drill bit. (Maria asked me once, “did you hold up your middle finger to the drill?”)

“There are also ‘sometimes words’ that are milder,” I say, “like damn or crap.”

This elicited some giggles.

Words We Never Use

Then we got into the territory of “never words” that should, obviously, never be used. This list is short.

Sonia guessed one of the words correctly, using a familiar shorthand.

By the confused looks on their faces, I’m not sure Elizabeth and Maria even knew the word it was a placeholder for. But they seemed to know by the tone of the conversation not to ask for a further explanation.

Last year at school, a student in Sonia’s class used this word as an insult in an email sent to several other students. The principal got involved and the repercussions were swift and severe. Lessons like this reveal the strength words can have to hurt others. It

also shows that using hate speech has consequences.

But it gets complicated pretty quickly. "Never words" for us may not be "never words" for others. For example, hateful words, once used to demean various groups of people, have been taken back by some — reframed as something positive. Female friends of mine can call each other the "B-word" with love but it would mean something entirely different coming from me.

As I said, the list of "never words" is different for different people.

The f-word has also featured in a few songs the girls have listened to online, such as Beyoncé's *Hold Up* which is greeted with wide eyes and squeals when she says "I'm a f—k me up a b—h." (<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/our-family-is-part-of-the-beyhive>) One song by French rapper Black M features the line "f—k *le vizier*," which basically translates to "f—k the king," which the kids think is fantastic.

I try and explain that these artists are "performing" at being angry just like actors perform in movies.

***As It Happens* asks: Could allowing kids to swear actually be a good thing?**

(<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-tuesday-full-episode-1.4682334/could-allowing-kids-to-swear-actually-be-a-good-thing-1.4682335>)

Swear Words *In Situ*

A few weeks ago Maria was brushing her teeth and dropped her toothbrush.

"F—k!" she said, in a not particularly angry voice.

"That word is a bit strong for a dropped toothbrush," said my wife. Maria shrugged.

But our hypocrisy is on full display.

They once heard me use the f-word when I was on the phone with a friend. "I wasn't really mad," I said, "I was just effing around." They look confused.

The bottom line is that if they want to know how (in)appropriate a word is, they should ignore the kid who said the word and pay attention to the adults in earshot — their faces will tell them everything they need to know about the power of words.

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