

SWEARING in Schools



by Márianna Csóti

Swearing among children is now so prevalent that schools are looking at ways of addressing the problem. Bremerton (Washington) High School, in the USA, had a “Dare Not To Swear!” campaign whereby more than 1000 pupils and staff signed a pledge to give up using swear words. Wednesfield High School, near Wolverhampton in the UK, introduced a “zero tolerance” policy on swearing, and staff found that both discipline and behaviour improved as a result. Here are some ideas to help teachers address the issue of swearing in schools.

Discussion Questions

What is swearing? (Swearing is using language that debases anything that should be held in reverence or respect—such as someone’s religion—or is said as an act of aggression. It includes racist and sexist remarks and words that are derogatory to any group of people.)

Why do people swear? (To make them feel part of a group; to make them look tough; because their parents or friends swear; because they like the sound of the words or they think it’s funny to swear; to shock other people; to bully other people; because everyone around them swears; because they don’t know enough adjectives to use alternative words; because they have vocal tics as part of Tourette’s syndrome over which they have little or no control—although they can deliberately swear using their diagnosis as an excuse.)

What are unhealthy consequences of swearing? (You might lose friends and the respect of other people; many people can get hurt by it; your parents might feel disappointed about the language you use; you might find it hard to stop swearing when it matters; you don’t look for alternative ways to settle disputes; you retain a limited vocabulary, and you might lose your job at some time in the future for swearing.)

Word Challenge

Invite the children to tell you all the swear words and phrases they know and to categorise them into: highly offensive, fairly offensive and mildly offensive. Who has had these words used on them or has used the words themselves? Is using these words treating people with respect? How have they felt when swear words have been used on them? Ask secondary age children what the swear words mean. Are there some swear words that the children feel should never be used whatever the circumstances?

Being Creative

Here are some ideas to help children stop swearing:

- Think of occasions when you swore and find alternative comments to make—use your imagination and a Thesaurus or dictionary to help you. Describe the situations with their corresponding comments or perform the situations as role plays.
- Make up a poster illustrating the consequences of swearing or reasons why it would be good to quit swearing.
- Write a poem or rap about swearing.
- Produce sponsor forms for you and your friends to raise money for a charity (or a school trip) by not swearing for a week and/or by having a swearing box at home (parents have to pay more than you do!).

Class Debate

Ask for two volunteers to take sides in a debate about whether swearing should be banned at school. Divide the class into two groups and ask each group to think of as many reasons as they can to support their speaker. After the debate, have a vote as to whether the school should ban swearing. However, if the children were to vote in favour of having a swearing ban, you need to consider whether this is a step the school is prepared to take as, initially, it would involve hard work and commitment from all staff members. How would it be implemented? And how could the children win over their peers to accept the new ruling?

Here are some points the speakers could make:

Arguments For A Ban On Swearing

Swearing increases the conflict between two people.

Too many people get hurt by swearing through knee-jerk reactions to an upsetting event. Swearing encourages violence as it is aggressive. People will forget how to be nice to one another.

Younger and younger children are using words that are deeply offensive. They need better role models.

If pupils and staff don’t swear the school will be a more pleasant place to spend time.

Friendships can break up through hurtful things being said.

The culture of the school would change and everyone would become more respectful. Classes would be less disruptive as people would be more likely to consider the consequences of their actions.

Getting used to not swearing increases your chances of a good reference on leaving school – and keeping your job when you’ve left school.

Not swearing will help the lives of any children you may have. They won’t be taught at home to swear.

Not swearing would make people search for more appropriate words and the standard of written and spoken English would improve for everyone. They would be much more articulate

Arguments For Allowing Swearing

Swearing helps release anger.

Swearing can let someone know in an instant that you are upset about something Swearing is acceptable these days and the school should move with the times.

The use of language changes throughout the centuries. This is just another language shift.

People should get tough and not let swearing bother them

Words can’t actually hurt – and everyone uses them

Through swearing you gain respect from your peers.

It would be too hard to change everyone – swearing is here to stay

My parents don’t mind me swearing – so why should anyone else?

It is easier to swear than to try to manage anger.

In a society that’s experiencing increasing violence among young people, working towards reducing children’s aggression by making them think harder about the language they use—and, hopefully, modifying it where necessary—can only be a good thing.

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