

THE POWER OF WORDS

By Sally Ryen

When I was a child, I remember the time my father almost lost it when a speeding motorist threatened to wipe out the entire Bennett family in our 1957 Ford. My father leaned way out the driver's window and shook his fist at the offending driver, spluttering, "you, you... YOU DUMB BUNNY!"

This sent the rest of us into gales of laughter, and phrase "dumb bunny" entered the family lexicon, meaning "an idiot defying polite description." It was not until I was an adult – I swear this – that I realized what my father really wanted to say.

That's how limited my exposure to profanity at home was. Long after learning the words myself, I still could not envision them coming out of my father's mouth, like a word balloon out of a cartoon character. To this day, I still have never heard my father or mother curse in anger or be crude for effect.

So when I became a parent, I set the same standards around our house, right? Wrong. I fully understand, admire and support those who do. And I know exactly why we don't.

When our daughters were young, my husband and I didn't swear in front of them. Ours went from being a normal twenty-something household of fans of the "Fish Cheer" to well..., to the Bennett household of 1957. Our friends didn't swear in front of our kids either; we either mouthed the words dramatically or gesticulated out of their (and Fred Rogers') sight.

Yes, there were major repercussions when first-grader Emma called three-year-old Maddy a naughty word she'd heard at school. And yes, we've had earnest discussions about why some phrases sound crude to certain people and should be substituted with something more palatable to all. But basically, language wasn't much of an issue until Emma reached junior high age.

At that point, my husband and I eased up on language. We became less likely to substitute a cleaner word, more likely to accurately quote the line from the movie and, on

the whole, freer to acknowledge that there are words out there that pack a punch, depending on how you use them.

The timing seemed right: Emma watches professional athletes hurl epithets at inept referees on TV, Maddy brings home pleas from her elementary school principal that parents remind their children that no swearing is allowed. Family video nights include PG-13 movies that contain language that makes me wince.

Bad words have suddenly become as much a part of our lives as Raffi lyrics used to be. And frankly, I'm kind of relieved.

Like any other taboo, swearing and crudeness lose some of their allure when they get no reaction. The reality of our society is that foul language is commonplace, a far cry from a time that my father remembers fondly when "all men wore hats and you never heard swearing on the street." I've told Maddy, who dislikes swearing, that she'll have to develop a thick skin and a deaf ear to get through life. She can ask someone privately not to swear around her, but she's going to hear it at junior high and Davis High School as surely as she'll hear the bells ring.

My mother serves as her role model here. My parents are avid sports fans, and in order to attend live sporting events, Mom has to tune out a lot of foul language around her in the stands. (My parents have been known to write the principal of a high school track team, complimenting the kids and their coach on their decorum and language in the bleachers.) It's become the rule, rather than the exception, for kids to talk however they want wherever they want.

As for Emma, who does occasionally use foul language, I warn her that if she uses it in public she runs the risk of offending someone around her. Worse, she is presenting herself in a way she may regret. "I guarantee that if you're standing in line at the movies with your friends and using foul language, there will be some adult nearby who knows who you are, and will draw conclusions about you based on the way you talk," I tell her.

Of course, that's part of growing up: stereotyping adults as out-of-touch, and not caring what they think. It's Emma's decision; I just feel obligated to point out to her some ramifications she may not have considered. She knows that if she uses certain language in front of certain adults (grandparents, teachers, friends' parents), she must accept the judgment and consequences from their end. If she finds herself to the point that she can't control her language, than, I tell her, she's got a problem, and needs to treat it as such.

Likewise, students of mine at Davis High who are incapable of writing an English essay without using words like "crap" or "sucks" are docked accordingly. Whether they like it or not, there's everyday language and then there's what linguists call "cash language." The latter is the language we have to adopt in public, at the workplace, in order to get by.

It's a tougher distinction to make than adults may realize. Why do we read Holden Caulfield's profane mutterings and call it great literature? What's acceptable in the public newspaper? Is there a difference between the term "bitch" when used as a putdown of females and "bitch" when it means "complain?"

Rather than make everything off-limits, as my parents did, I prefer maintaining an open mind about the usefulness of profanity. I remember being shocked when a friend of mine's daughter used the phrase, "That sucks," in front of us. In my mind, it was a vile term, one that wouldn't be allowed. My friend, years ahead of me in the parenting game, didn't bat an eyelash. I realized that this was another example of choosing one's battles, and in the global warfare of raising teenagers, this didn't even rate as a skirmish.

I gave up swearing for Lent this spring; I'd decided I was entering that mindless phase that I remember from college years, when I just didn't feel like searching my vocabulary for the specific word I wanted to use. Lent is over, but I'm continuing my ban on swearing. The results have been twofold: I realize how much I punctuated my speech with profanity, and notice how offensive daily conversation has become. I'm not turning into a prude, but I find myself thinking that some of us sound like idiot.

The words I use now are more carefully chosen, and have the intended effect they should have. I feel less hypocritical about asking others not to use certain phrases around me, and more articulate around adults

who don't swear or use vulgar language. And yes, I feel a more virtuous person, setting an example for my own daughters and high school students while acknowledging the realities of the world. Sometimes a person just has to let a few choice words fly, and if they're judiciously doled out, they will pack more of a punch than those uttered by some foul-mouthed moron.

I like where we're at right now. Nobody's shocked by what others may say, but we respect each other's tolerance levels. By allowing profanity, we take away some of its thrill for our daughters. We wouldn't do this with, say, alcohol, for different reasons, one of them being the law. So, hopefully, they begin to understand the difference between laws and ethics.

At the same time, they learn to recognize the value of restraint, especially when someone cuts us off in traffic and I splutter, "You, you... YOU DUMB BUNNY!" This sends them into gales of laughter just as it did my brothers and me forty years ago, only this time they know exactly what it is I'd like to say, but choose not to.

Sally Ryen

Parenting Handouts are available at no cost to individuals and at those family child care homes and children's programs that request them for parents. An index of past handouts is also available. To request an index, individual copies of past handouts, or to be put on a mailing list, call Child Care Services at 757-5691 or 1-800-378-5044 or stop by the Child Care Services Office at 604 Second Street, Davis.

J:\pcs\chcare\r&r\handout\jan00par

