Inappropriate Language – When Children Use “Bad Words”

Most people who care for children have run into at least one child who swears, uses “potty talk,” or uses hurtful or socially unacceptable language. Sometimes children hear these words from other children or family members, while out in public, from TV and music – or even from you. At some time in their development, young children experiment with language as they learn what is or is not socially acceptable, and begin to test boundaries.

Why Children Use Inappropriate Language

There are a number of reasons why a child may use inappropriate language. Sometimes a child uses a word by accident; she may be repeating what she has heard without knowing that the words are inappropriate or what the words really mean; she may swear because she wants to imitate her friend or family; she may use potty talk to get attention or a reaction; or she may use hurtful language when upset.

Sometimes when playing word games, words you ask children not to use slip out. For example: “What rhymes with ‘head?’ “Bed!” “What rhymes with ‘knee?’ “Bee!” “What rhymes with ‘tummy?’ “Dummy!” If none of the children notice, keep the fun going. If someone does realize it (“Davy called you a dummy!”) address it matter-of-factly (“Davy was only making a rhyme. He was not calling me a name.”) and move on with the game.

Some children may use these words to get attention from others or to be like peers. The attention that a child likes may be coming from you, other children, or from home. There may not be much you can do about the attention she gets from other places, but you can reduce the attention she gets from using inappropriate words while in your care. Make a point of going to this child often during the day. Talk with her and pay attention to her when she is doing appropriate things. Point out positive things about her to the other children. You could say, “I liked the way you asked John if you could play with the truck” or “Kara has a good idea of where we can go for a walk today.” If she repeats the inappropriate words, tell her again, “That’s a word we don’t use here” and help her move on to another activity.

When a child gets attention from using inappropriate language, other children may begin to imitate him for attention, to fit in, or because they think the words sound funny. Be consistent and address the behavior with all children. If others start imitating, help the other children find better ways to get attention. Quietly say to each child, “You have good words of your own. You don’t have to use the same words Jessica is using.” When addressing the behavior with a group of children, carefully choose consequences that will discourage the language and lessen the sense of being a group. For example, if a small group starts chanting “potty talk” phrases during circle time, having them leave the circle and do to another activity as a small group could be a fun thing for them, so they may be more likely to do it again during the next circle time. Instead talk with the group about their behavior and then have them choose separate activities.

When a child is upset, he might lash out at another child verbally. You could say to him, “I know it makes you angry when John takes your toy. Instead of calling John a dummy, tell him, ‘It makes me angry when you take my truck.’” Or a child may swear when he is angry, imitating what he’s heard elsewhere. Teach this child to use other words to express his feelings. You could say, “I understand you are upset when the blocks fall over. But the word you said is not one we use here. If you are upset, you may say, ‘Rats!’ (or another acceptable word) instead.”
Responding to Inappropriate Language

When adults hear a young child use inappropriate language, they usually either laugh or are shocked and do not respond. This can be confusing to the child and may make it harder to address the issue. When a child uses inappropriate language, address it directly and immediately. Stay calm, keep a straight face, and say to her, “That’s a word we don’t use here.” If the child asks why, explain in a simple manner why not. For example: “That can hurt someone’s feelings” or “Most people do not like those words.”

If a child continues to use inappropriate language, be consistent in your response and try to figure out why a child may be using it. If you understand why a child uses inappropriate language, it’s easier to work with the child to deal with the problem. Think about the various reasons why children use inappropriate language. Watch closely to find out when the child uses inappropriate language and what’s happening at the time. Also, think about what you and others say to the children and around the children. Children may be hearing conversations that you think are out of listening range. Remember—children will repeat what you say and do. Be sure to use the same words that you want the children to use.

Talk with the child’s family and let them know what the child has said and under what circumstances. Be careful not to blame or put down a child’s parents or family. The child may have heard the words from others or may not have used the words at home. Work with the family to find a common way to respond to the child when he uses inappropriate language, and be consistent.

References:

Resources:

Early Childhood News – Articles on various child development topics.
http://www.earlychildhoodnews.com

National Network for Child Care (NNCC) – articles on various child development topics.
http://www.nncc.org/homepage.html

Healthy Children.org – Information and articles for families on a variety of child development topics.
http://www.healthychildren.org/english/family-life/Pages/default.aspx