



# GUIDANCE MATTERS

Dan Gartrell

## Swearing and Words That Hurt

Sitting alone in the book corner, Sherry is talking to herself: “Shick? Nah. Ship? Nah. Sh\*t?” The teacher, overhearing, grins. He is curious about what Sherry will do next. The four-year-old gets up, walks toward him, and with a smile says, “Sh\*t, Teacher.” Kneeling at the child’s level and looking her in the eyes (okay in Sherry’s cultural group), he compliments Sherry on her use of new words, then adds, “That word bothers people in our classroom, though, so please don’t use it. But you keep learning new words, okay? That is good to do.” Some days later, the teacher realizes that he hasn’t heard Sherry use “that” word again.



Kindergarten is in its second week. Thad wets his pants but ignores it and continues drawing. Before the teacher notices Thad’s dilemma, Lon does. He tells other children, and they begin laughing about “Pee-Pants Thad.” Many in the class overhear. While another staff member takes Thad to the bathroom to change clothes, Vicki, the teacher, calls an unscheduled class meeting. She tells the class that when she was young, she once wet her pants at school. She says the other children—and the teacher—made fun of her, and she still feels sad about it. One boy responds by saying his sister wet her pants and he didn’t make fun of her. Other children share experiences about their accidents. Thad returns to the room wearing different pants. Vicki is pleased when one of the children involved in the name-calling says, “It’s okay, Thad. I wet my pants once too.” Thad looks relieved and takes his seat.



Wayne is building with blocks by himself. He has been having a tough time lately, and the teachers work hard to help him get through each day. As Ryan hurries by, his foot knocks over part of Wayne’s construction. Totally losing control, Wayne unleashes a string of swearwords (not all pronounced correctly but more than the teachers have heard from the rest of the

children together all year!) and throws a block. Myra, the teacher who has worked most with Wayne, sits beside him, puts her arm around his shoulders, and quietly says, “It’s alright to be upset, Wayne. It’s alright.” Wayne begins to cry. He leans against Myra. After a few comforting moments, Myra helps Wayne rebuild his structure. In a soothing tone she talks with him about what happened and what he could say instead next time.



**FOR STARTERS**, just a reminder that in this column I use the term *mistaken behavior* rather than *misbehavior*. Because the latter term carries centuries of moral baggage, when teachers view conflicts as misbehavior, they tend to slide into unhelpful judgments about the character of a child. They may make bad child/good child assumptions and discipline the child based on those assumptions.

In learning difficult skills, such as the social uses of language, we *all* make mistakes—especially young children. This column discusses swearing and hurting words as errors in judgment (mistakes) by children as they learn to use language. For me, even Wayne, who in the third anecdote swore on purpose and threw a block, did not “misbehave,” but showed a

mistaken behavior. As with all mistaken behaviors, children swear for different reasons. Even when an action is deliberate, the teacher who sees it as mistaken behavior is in a solid psychological position to provide guidance and will not feel the need to punish—with the negative classroom dynamics that tend to follow.

### Sherry: Experimentation

Let’s face it, children often hear others use expletives (swearing and other exclamations spoken in emotional circumstances). For many children, like Sherry, the reactions caused by these words can be enticing.

Trying new things, including new words, is what healthy four-year-olds are about. Writers from Montessori to Erikson to Gardner have been stating for years that experimentation is how young children learn. Brain research tells us that optimal neural development occurs as children experience the intrigue of discovery without the stress of harsh evaluation (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). When we withhold moral judgment, we have to admit that Sherry was engaged in a high-level, phonetic word-recognition activity! The challenge to teachers is that chil-

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Please send your guidance anecdotes and other comments to [dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu](mailto:dgartrell@bemidjistate.edu). Thanks to Vicki Wangberg of Bemidji for sharing her often borrowed anecdote. Children’s names in all anecdotes are changed.

Illustration by Patrick Cavanagh.

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dren's experiments sometimes take us—and them—in edgy directions.

Sherry's teacher saw her developmental need to experiment. He used a compliment sandwich to steer Sherry's experimentation within the guidelines for productive classroom behavior. The teacher knew that overreaction might prompt a child to store certain words for use in "just the right" emotional situations. Sherry did not see the need to use the word again, a sign that the teacher successfully balanced guidance and support in his classroom.

### Thad: Socially influenced hurting words

Children are like living sponges. They absorb information from the world around them and incorporate it into their growing beings. A child is socially influenced by adults and repeats in school words heard at home and in the community. Word experiments like "berry intelligent" make us smile without condition; a word like "sh\*t," as used by Sherry, may also make us smile, but that is probably not our only reaction.

Classroom peers exert social influence on individuals, sometimes toward mistaken behaviors like a child starting a chant of "Pee-Pants Thad." The leadership style of the teacher has much to do with whether socially influenced mistaken behavior becomes a pattern or remains just a sometime thing. When mistaken behavior involves many children, as in the second anecdote, it is time for a class meeting. Vicki's meeting did what this forum does best: respectfully raises empathy levels and reminds the group that the classroom is to be encouraging for all.

Class meetings sometimes involve complicated social dynamics, including the issue of whether the child at the center of the situation should be present. In the November 2006 issue of *Young Children*, Guidance Matters addresses some of these issues in a

column titled, "The Beauty of Class Meetings."

### Wayne: Strong unmet needs

When children experience frequent and severe conflict over time, they face problems that are bigger than they are. For reasons of biology, life circumstances, or a mix of the two, these children have deep unmet needs. Their behaviors are no less mistaken than those of children for whom survival is not an issue. The conflicts they cause—often so challenging to adults—are attempts to ask for help. With his stress level high and his still-developing brain geared to fight or flight, Wayne could in no way say, "Ryan, it really bothers me that you knocked down part of my building."

Wayne's blue streak of swearwords was his way of protesting that his life was overwhelming and he had lost control. From her relationship with Wayne, Myra guessed the meaning of his behavior; she knew that the swearing was a symptom of the difficult challenges Wayne faced. At NAEYC's 2007 National Institute for Early Childhood Professional Development in Pittsburgh, I shared this thought:

**Children who are challenging to adults are challenged by their own circumstances. The challenge for the teacher is to build a relationship with the child, work with fellow staff on a coordinated guidance plan, collaborate with family and other professionals to improve the situation, and, in short, rise to the challenge of the challenging behavior.**

For children like Wayne, swearing is an expression of unmet needs, not an indication of their character.

There are many reasons children swear and use hurting words. When we see the use of expletives as a signal to learn about and work with a child, we are on the road to being caring professional teachers.

## To increase your knowledge

Children use swearwords and hurting language in the overall process of language development. By understanding more about language development in general, the early childhood professional can listen to and interact with children to help them develop communication skills that make the "edgy words" unnecessary. Here are two articles you can read:

Bailey, B., & C. Brookes. 2003. Thinking out loud: Development of private speech and the implications for school success and self-control. *Young Children* 58 (5): 46–52.

Bailey and Brookes discuss the stages of development of private speech from infancy through age eight and provide teachers with informal methods of assessing which stage a child is in.

Soundy, C., & N. Stout. 2002. Pillow talk: Fostering the emotional and language needs of young learners. *Young Children* 57 (2): 20–24.

Meaningful verbal interactions are important to young children and support their language development. Soundy and Stout describe Pillow Talk, a nap-time ritual in which the teacher gives every child special one-on-one attention and acknowledges the child's interests and experiences. Language is the foundation for all academic and social skills, and Pillow Talk teaches children that communicating with adults is interesting and rewarding.

## A step you can take

Intentionally look for the occasions when a child uses expletives or hurting words. If you need to intervene, do so, but in a firm and friendly way that involves either a guidance talk (perhaps with a compliment sandwich) or—if several children are involved—a class meeting. Brainstorm with colleagues why the child may have used the particular words. How might you use thoughts from this discussion as you continue to work with the child?

## References

Shonkoff, J.P., & D.A. Phillips; eds. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. A report of the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

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