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What the F***K?

Why children swear and how to deal with it

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Swearing makes us feel bad....

There is something about having a child swear at us that really gets under our skin. Swearing represents a big trigger for many of us for many different reasons which we will be exploring next.

Most of the families that I work with have children that swear. Some of them are very young but can swear like troopers. This just feels wrong to the majority of adopters, foster carers, sgo or other parents. Swearing makes us feel:

- **Belittled** – Swearing is dismissive and crude and sometimes delivered in an offhand manner as if who we are and our views and values are unimportant.
- **Under attack** – which may well be the truth! Swearing AT someone (rather than ABOUT something) is a very personal way of being very offensive.
- **Hated** – The way we interpret this is that you just don't talk to people you care about that way.
- **Violated** – Some words in particular feel really vicious and hurtful – the word C**t is probably the word that feels most aggressive when applied personally.
- **Disrespected** – Because it is not respectful language. It is directly opposed to how we feel we should be addressed as parents.
- **Abused** – There is no doubt that swearing is abusive, and it is usually used to emphasise a demand or a statement that is addressed to us.
- **Scared** – Often swearing is a sign of escalation and those of us that have lived with violence and abuse from our children can immediately become concerned about where this is heading. We can also be scared about where it is all heading.
- **Out of control** – Is the situation about to escalate? Can I maintain control over my own child?

So what is it that affects us so much?

- **Our own experience** – we may have memories of swearing – and we may be thinking we would NEVER have spoken to our parents like that....
- **Triggers for us** – If we have ever been subjected to verbal abuse ourselves then hearing someone else behave like that towards us may be a huge trigger. Likewise



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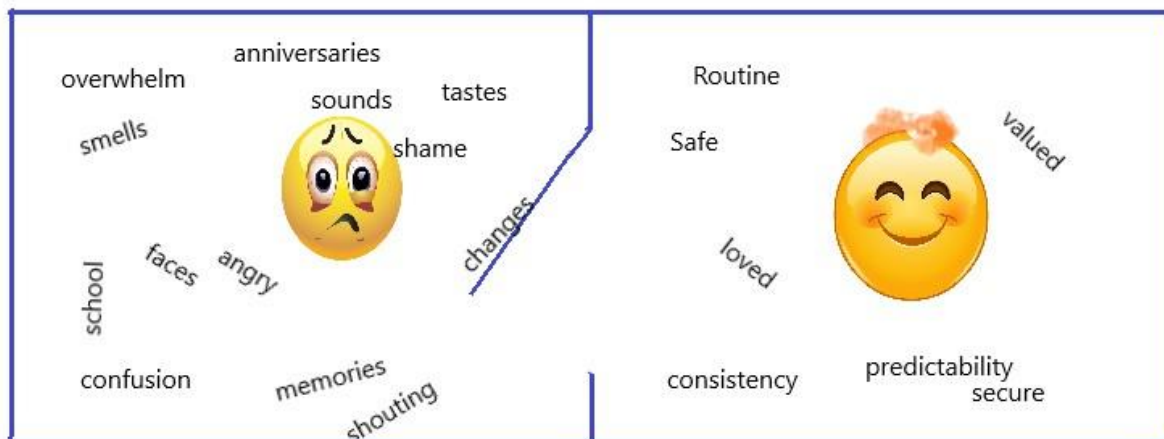
we may never have experienced this kind of verbal attack and really feel out of our depth.

- **Childhood memories** – When I was growing up I did swear - we all did, kind of a teenage rite of passage – but we all understood that we would NEVER swear in front of our parents or teachers. It was something you kept quiet unless with your peers. There was a stage in my life when the adults around me swore as a matter of course, and this was also unpredictable and therefore frightening. Our background will determine our reaction to an extent.
- **Social Expectations** – Swearing, like other “bad” behaviour is not something we want to be public. I grew up understanding that you did not “show your parents up”. This kind of social filter is simply not within the capacity of our traumatised children.
- **Judgement of Others (family, friends, society in general)** – the blaming and judgemental response of others makes us feel insecure about ourselves and our parenting capabilities.
- **Fear** – We can feel very fearful that despite all that we are doing, we will never make a difference. We can also have fear knowing where the behaviour may escalate.
- **Didn't sign up for this** – We wanted a family. To watch children grow and thrive. We were sold a dream, and somehow ended up in a nightmare. It can feel like there is no way out.

Why do they do it?

ROOM 1 – Trauma Room

ROOM 2 – Safe Room



Clearly, we are not really talking about rooms, but about emotional states that our children enter into. We need to consider this in terms of environmental, sensory or other factors which may be trigger traumas, and which factors are needed for recovery. We also of course need to remember that change takes time, and that other factors such as cognitive, social or emotional issues, additional diagnoses such as ASD, ADHD, RAD, FASD all need to be considered. Hence our children have



complex needs. In each individual case, there will be a greater or lesser number of triggers or stress points.

In the trauma room, I have given a sample of the issues that can trigger memories of trauma. These are often very real sensory states to our children and this is why this is a perfect analogy. It is as if the child is sucked back through time and space by the sensory, emotional or other input.

The trauma room is a terrifying place where adults may not be trusted – they abandon or hurt you. There is no predictability. No routine. There is chaos and fear. There is immense shame, and a sense of self as a terrible person. This has been your reality. You have had to fight to survive, and your fight/flight stress reaction is easily triggered. Once your fight/flight response is triggered, your brain does not stop to consider consequences; it's job is to follow raw instinct to ensure survival.

Please remember: Sensory triggers can cause trauma memories to emerge which feel to the child as though they are happening in the here and now.

The child also tries to recreate what is familiar.

In the safe room there are factors which enable the child to feel warm, safe and loved. These emotions and sensory states allow a child or young person to relax, to process, to understand and make sense of their relationships and get their trauma into context. Unfortunately, these feelings are unfamiliar and can make the child feel vulnerable. This makes our job as parents far more difficult.

In the safe room there is help, empathy, kind adults. There is predictability and routine so that cause and effect and consequences become understandable ideas. You are given appropriate models of behaviour to follow, and these are also consistent. Your stress levels may remain quite high, but your fight flight response is not activated, meaning that you can learn to understand yourself and use strategies to help you

Please remember:

These feelings are hard for traumatised children to accept and during the fragile attachment stage of a relationship when the child is beginning to trust they can also feel very vulnerable – so close loving interactions can be followed by feelings of unworthiness and fear, causing the child to fall into Room 1- this child may be like a



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pushmepullyou, or Jeekyll and Hyde.

How do our children get dragged into the trauma room?

We, as adults, can manage only a certain amount of stress before we get wobbly. The same goes for our children, but they have more triggers and their fuse can be very small, leading to that Jekyll and Hyde child that that changes for no reason, or just because you let them know it is tea time. So just imagine a glass. That is your child's stress container. Then imagine what their base line of stress may be – (general fear of being abandoned, that they are actually bad, pervasive shame or uncertainty are just some examples of what children carry as luggage every day).



This stress is heightened by school. Its too busy, too noisy. Break times are unstructured. You do not know what might happen. You have no friends. You are bullied. Now imagine it is also Christmas. Routine has disappeared in favour of Christmas plays, parties and decorations. You find it hard to manage the lights, sounds and smells and extra sensory input. You are expected to behave, have fun and join in. You come out of school, overstimulated and hungry.



Your stress level by now is very near the top of the glass.

You ask for a snack, but because you are wobbly it comes out as a yell. You are beginning to panic. Mum or Dad is also stressed. They snap back a cross comment. You begin to panic – they are going to be like those other adults. You knew they didn't want you, wouldn't understand. When you get home you race for the biscuit jar – maybe sugar will help. You get into trouble for not waiting, not asking and not sitting nicely or



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putting your bag or coat away. You are unable to cope any more – fully activated your stress response leads you to lash out in fear and anger.



At this point, all your memories, the cross faces, Christmas, Shouting, being hungry and lack of consistency which are all part of your trauma, have flooded your brain with cortisol and before you know it, you are right back in the trauma room.

(Note: I have used Christmas as an example, but equally stressors can be birthdays, anniversaries, difficulties in a lesson, hunger...)

We can imagine that two different sets of words being with each set of feelings:

Words that go with the feelings (What we might hear from our children)	
Aggressive angry words.... Child is in Room 1	Kind loving words.... Child is in room 2
Fuck off! Fucking bitch!! Dickhead; Idiot; C**t; Hate; Wish you were dead; Want to kill you/commit suicide; Future is scary	Love you; You're the best; belong; claimed; Want to cuddle you; Love being with you; Future is bright;

Why the swearing?

First, ask yourself the question “do I ever swear?” and then think about when this happens. Most of us swear from time to time under specific circumstances, some of us incorporate swearing into day to day language, and some people use offensive language as a matter of course.



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Emotional states – often, we will swear when taken by surprise – often a one word expletive such as “Shit!” or “Fuck!”. We also swear when we are angry – a common example being road rage or when driving – “Fucking idiot! Why don’t you look where you are going?” “Bastard!”. People can swear when they are happy or excited, after a glass or two when their inhibitions are lower or because they hurt themselves. I remember being out on a walk and watching a group of young boys (around 10-12) fishing in a local stew pond. I happened to be passing as they landed an enormous carp in their net and they were dancing around and shouting with glee “look at the fucking size of that c**t!!” They were not being offensive, but expressive.

Likewise many people swear all the time without seeming to be very aware of it – for instance a colleague was telling me about a client of hers whose 3-4 year old was beginning to swear, saying in complete innocence “ I have no fucking idea where she has picked that up!”

Our children swear because:

Toddlers to teens

- It has been the language of their lives to date
- They are experiencing a trauma memory and “showing” you what life was like for them
- They are back in room one
- They know it is a sure fire way to get attention, and they need to keep your attention fixed on them.
- As proof of their toughness as they get older – a shield

Teens (all of the above..)

- **Here’s a newsflash!** Teens swear. It’s part of teen language, part of the swagger. So this is partly a developmental stage
- Similar to above, to fit in with their peers
- Attention needing
- Lack of social filter – as a teen I would not have sworn in front of my mum (who did swear herself!) or another adult or teacher. However children from trauma do not always possess a social filter to only swear in certain situations. Also their reliance on their limbic brains means they have more of an emotional spark and little or no impulse control.

So What can we do??

Its only words...

This is hard. Swearing feels personal, abusive and shocking. Some words may be particularly shocking to you, very often the one that makes people most upset is “C**t”.

We really need to have our Teflon coated outfits on (in our minds) so that we can let these words roll off us. Words can only hurt us with our permission – if we believe them they are painful! If they press an insecure button, they hurt. If we are told we are a crap parent or a fucking bitch or prick when we feel useless then it’s hard not to take this on board. But it is really important to develop immunity and words to deflect the pain without sending it back to



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the child. So imagine your Teflon coated shield and desensitise yourself. Say all the worst things you can think of out loud to yourself. Practise with a partner or a friend.

Pause to reconnect your brain

Remember, a calm amygdala can help an activated amygdala to step down. But to do this you have to be in a good state yourself. By pausing, stepping back, taking a moment to evaluate what is going on, we can reconnect our own brains, and be more able to de-escalate. This does take practice, and it is not always possible, but it is worth remembering. To help, you may need to step right away and take a moment – in the bathroom if necessary. When appropriate, you can address the issue in a calm and therapeutic way.

When safety comes in, trauma comes out

When a child begins to feel safe in a relationship, they start showing you their trauma. This may be in conversation, but with deeply held trauma memories it is often a literal acting out of the behaviours or remembered events. Try to link what is happening to their history. This will help you to bear in mind that it is not them, it's what happened to them. It's not you, it's what they have been through. For instance, it is common for our children to have food issues as a result of early neglect and hunger. This can linger for years before they reframe their expectations through repeated experience of being fed. In the meantime you might always get swearing when they are getting to a meal time as hunger is so dysregulating for them. If you know this about their history and make the link, you can calm them by saying "I can see you are hungry. Tea will be at..... Would you like a snack to keep you going?" Or you might always have snack boxes, fruit etc available.

You can also wait it out (if this is safe, not if swearing is a prelude to violence). Maintain parental presence, make non-committal noises. Help them to understand that you can see/hear something is feeling really difficult. Let them know you are there to help them understand those big feelings.

If a child is yelling at you to "Fuck off!" then please do back off. Let them know you are nearby. If they are going away from you, let them go. Do not worry about the disrespect – they are trying NOT to hurt you. Talk to them when they are calm. Offer an unconditional repair – a drink or a snack. Let them know that you could see they were upset. Remind them you are there to help and listen.

The WOW factor

It is not always possible not to respond – after all, we are human! Having a short word that you can yell to discharge some of your own tension without joining in the slanging can be really useful – and because its unexpected can stop a situation escalating. **Wow!** is good but think of some of your own. Also use substitutions around the house to model different use of language – words like "fudge" or "sugar".can redirect children that are just used to swearing as a way of talking.

Relationship repair

We want to shift our children from shame to appropriate guilt – Its not them, but the behaviour (or words) that are undesirable and we are there to help them with that. We do this by letting them know they are still important to us, no matter what. We will support them. When doing a relationship repair we do not say "but" and then tell the child how bad they



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are, we let them know purely about their importance to us. Often when the child is able to believe in the relationship, their behaviours cease.

Link to History if appropriate

Use a narrative to link history to behaviours if known to you. For instance you might say

- “I think when you were little you heard lots of swearing and shouting. It must have been scary for you. We try to use kind words, and we will keep trying to help you to remember to do that”
- “It is hard taking all the new rules on board. I am going to keep helping you with that”

Try to be patient – it takes time to shed old concepts and patterns of behaviour.

Self Care

The final point is also probably the most important – do what you can to look after yourself.

- Support Group – Face to Face or remote.
- Time with friends
- Phone the helpline
- Time with partner (take a sick day if you need to!)
- Make the most of natural breaks – when children are at school
- Keep a stock of your favorite treat

You children can only change with your support, and that is hard and relentless, so it is important to take time out for yourself.