



By Gregory Ramey, PhD, child psychologist at Dayton Children's and *Dayton Daily News* columnist

What's wrong with vulgar words?

After telling my older brother to “shut up,” I immediately heard my mom yell, “Gregory, get in your room.” My mom rarely called me Gregory. I was in trouble.

“Never use that word again,” she said in her firm Italian accent. I was only about 6 years old and not smart enough to just be quiet. “Ma, what’s so wrong with saying ‘shut up’? Everyone says it,” I argued. My mom never graduated from high school and wasn’t very sophisticated. However, she had an uncanny ability to focus on what was really important.

“Gregory, can’t you think of a nicer way to get attention?” she asked.

“Shut up” seems pretty mild today. I was watching one of my favorite TV programs a few weeks ago, *Clean House*. The team helps families replace clutter with cleanliness by selling old items to raise money for new furniture. When someone from the show asked a father and teenage son to sell their guitar, dad and child unanimously shouted “No f*** way,” although the profanity was bleeped from the program. Even *Clean House* uses dirty language.

Research summarized by the Parents Television Council suggests that profanity has increased substantially over the past 10 years. Milder profanities are used more frequently, and harsher vulgarities appear to be gaining tacit acceptance. The number of expletives used in broadcast TV in 2007 was about 11,000 - almost twice that of 10 years ago. Twenty-five percent of the profanities were intense, such as the f-word, s-word or b-word. Vulgarities are no longer restricted to late evening hours, but occur during times when younger children watch television.

Maybe my mom was wrong. After all, these are just words. They don’t have any meaning other than what we assign to them. Maybe words should annoy or offend sometimes. Yesterday’s vulgarities have become today’s commonplace way to communicate anger, annoyance or aggravation. Perhaps our overreaction to these words just increases the likelihood that they will be used.

I think my mom would argue otherwise. She'd probably say that the words we use reflect who we really are. She'd probably talk about civility and courtesy, and the need to be respectful even if you feel angry or upset. While these words certainly get attention, I imagine she'd repeat her comment that there are nicer ways to get people to notice you.

Maybe we can't have any impact on our culture, but we can exert some influence with our families and friends. I've worked as a coach with kids of various ages, and have set a clear expectation about what words I find offensive. I ask kids to be respectful of my values, and not use vulgar or harsh words, including "shut up," in my presence. I've been amazed and pleased that kids rise to this standard and refrain from such language.

At a time when many families feel victimized by a culture that appears increasingly crude and crass, you can still encourage values of respect, courtesy and civility.

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