Go ahead, curse in front of your kids

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The late comedian George Carlin, whose comedy routine about the “Seven Dirty Words” banned from broadcast by the FCC became infamous in the late 1970s, performs in Orange County in 1999. (Los Angeles Times)

I always seasoned my vocabulary with as many four-letter words as 50-cent ones, at least until my first child was born two years ago. That’s when I found myself — and I’m almost embarrassed to admit it — watching my language. Something deep in my subconscious told me that profanity might harm him in some way, that even a fleeting expletive, like a curse word uttered while stumbling over a child gate, could do lasting damage.

Because I was not only a new parent but also a cognitive scientist specializing in language, I decided to investigate the issue.

And I’m happy to report that, nowadays, if I drop an f-bomb in front of my kid, I don’t sweat it.

My deep-seated concern about profanity was the product of social conditioning. Through instruction and occasional punishment, we learn the lesson that certain words are bad for young minds. Our institutions reinforce that message. The Federal Communications Commission bans profanity on television and radio between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. The Motion Picture Assn. of America considers “strong language” when it rates new films.

Although police officers rarely enforce legal codes that prohibit public obscenity, adults caught swearing in front of children may find themselves in trouble. A woman named Danielle Wolf, for example, was arrested in a South Carolina supermarket for telling her husband, “Stop squishing the [obscenity] bread!” in front of her children. UC Riverside graduate student Elizabeth Venable was cited for using the same word (not “bread”) in front of families with small children at John Wayne Airport.

I’ve heard several theories for why swearing around kids is wrong. (I should be clear that I’m not talking about swearing at kids; verbal abuse is known to be psychologically damaging.) And these explanations don’t all revolve around etiquette or social norms. Some, like the American Academy of Pediatrics, argue that exposure to profanity is actually dangerous because it encourages aggression or will numb a child’s normal emotional reactions.

As far as I know, scientists have never conducted a controlled experiment aimed at uncovering the consequences of swearing in front of children; you can’t ethically justify exposing 5-year-olds to heavy cursing if there’s even the slightest risk of harm. But college students are another story. And we can extrapolate to children from experimental research conducted with adults.

The only profane words that demonstrably cause trouble are slurs. A 2014 study exposed 52 university students (average age: 21 years) to either a slur for homosexuals or a neutral term. Those who saw the slur subsequently thought that less money should go towards AIDS-HIV prevention efforts for “high risk groups.” In another, 61 participants (average age: 23) saw either a homosexual slur or a neutral label. The ones who saw the slur positioned their chairs physically farther away from a
person they believed to be homosexual by an average of more than 10 centimeters.

Slurs may have similar or greater effects in children, who are less developed socially and cognitively. Indeed, correlational studies suggest as much. For instance, a study that followed 143 middle school students found that those who reported more exposure to homophobic slurs tended to report feeling less connected to their school lives. They also exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression.

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But there’s no similar proof that exposure to ordinary profanity — four-letter words — causes any sort of direct harm: no increased aggression, stunted vocabulary, numbed emotions or anything else.

Of course, parents aren’t holding their tongues solely because they think hearing a bad word will turn their kid into a criminal. They also worry that the kid will turn around and use it. And yet the largest observational study — again we don’t have controlled experiments — found that childhood swearing is largely innocuous. Scientists documented children ages 1 to 12 naturally producing thousands of taboo utterances, and only rarely witnessed negative repercussions. On no occasion did swearing lead to physical violence. Instead, taboo words were used mostly for positive reasons, for instance humor, and mostly were not produced out of anger.

I’ve come up with a compromise solution. I don’t censor myself because I know my child won’t suffer cognitive or emotional damage; and I don’t try to stop him from parroting me, in large part because I’m not delusional enough to think that would work. But when I happen to swear around my kid, I provide some coaching. I engage him in an honest dialogue about why some words are OK in some places, but not others. Even a 2-year-old can understand that the f-word can be muttered consequence-free at home but might lead to a negative reaction when screamed in the supermarket.

Although my son might not achieve lapse-free tailoring of his language right away, context-sensitivity is not beyond a child’s reach. He’s already learning that some activities are appropriate in the bathroom or the doctor’s office, but not the schoolyard or classroom. Through coaching, parents can help children develop a healthy relationship with their native tongue, including the parts that allow them to communicate their strongest emotions.

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