



gretchen's  
house

*So you want to know more about...*

# Potty Talk



You never thought you'd hear the words "**poopy butthead**" pass through your sweet child's lips, but it happened.

Most kids hear and repeat a few expletives before they get to kindergarten. Is it normal? Absolutely. Can you prevent it? No, no more than you can prevent the experimental hitting and throwing that all kids do at some point. But you **can** influence how long they linger at this embarrassing developmental stage.

First, understand the **why**: power. Kids feel us flinch when we stub our toes and cuss in their presence, or notice us cringe when another adult utters an off-color word. They intuitively realize the awesome power of bad words, which leads us to the **when**: kids tend to choose the most inopportune moments to try out their new power tools. Often it's in public, because boundaries for behavior get fuzzier in public, and there's a bigger audience.

But **where** do they find these new word weapons? Preschool? Sometimes. They also hear them at the mall, or playground, or at dinner parties. But often they don't even have to leave home: many "children's" shows on television include language that leaves much to be desired. Older siblings are also a source of naughty talk, and every once in a while, even mom and dad.

Keep in mind that kids often begin to use stronger language when they give up using physical means to communicate — it's progress!

So how can you pull the plug on potty talk? Don't let those words make you lose your cool. If you laugh or yell, your child will think, "Hmmm. That was a strong reaction. I'd like to see that again."

At the center, we try to be very **boring** about potty talk. If a child keeps saying "poop," we might have a conversation about poop: *What is it? Where does it come from? Where does it belong?* We give kids permission to talk about the "forbidden subject" in an appropriate context, and they usually tire of it fairly quickly.

We also ask kids to **clarify** when they use inappropriate language. "What does that word mean — are you angry with Ben?" Kids often use shocking words (or voices) when they don't know how else to get some attention — so we offer more appropriate choices to try the next time they need something.

With words for body parts: penis, vagina, etc., we stick to **context**. We might say, "When you are going potty, you can talk about your penis, but when you come out of the bathroom you should be all done." Sometimes this talk reflects kids' growing awareness of basic bodily functions.

In terms of name-calling, we don't distinguish between "potty" words and other insults. **We don't allow name-calling, period.** Kids who repeatedly call other kids names have consequences such as limited play choices until they can control themselves.

Children also like the playful sound of new words and may use a "swear" word without considering its meaning. **Adults can give kids alternatives**, such as saying "fiddlesticks" when you're frustrated. Playing language games (singing songs such as "Willabee, Wallabee, Woo," or "I Like to Eat Apples and Bananas," or reading books full of puns, such as *Amelia Bedelia*) can also help meet children's need to manipulate words.

## Further reading

- *Elbert's Bad Word*, by Don and Audrey Wood
- *Everyone Poops*, by Taro Gomi
- *The Berenstain Bears and the Big Blooper*, by Jan and Stan Berenstain

# Strategies for Minimizing Inappropriate Talk

- Monitor your own speech: words like stupid, crap, etc. can easily slip into adult conversation unnoticed. But little pitchers have big ears. Keep the same rules for your language as for your kids'.
- Watch television with your kids, if they watch it. Monitor what you listen to on the radio, as well. Talk radio shows and popular music often contain things you don't want your three year old to say.
- When your child tosses off some potty talk, change the subject. Sometimes they never know what hit them.
- React matter of factly to potty talk. "Yes, that's poop. Everyone poops."
- Use the correct terminology for body parts. Family words for body parts can be offensive to others. Calling your own breasts your boobies might not bother you, but imagine your mortification if your child refers to a stranger's body using that term.

**"Why does that man talk funny?"** Sometimes children aren't using inappropriate language, but are saying things that are impolite. Appealing to their sense of propriety doesn't help, because children are too egocentric to imagine that their observations might hurt someone else's feelings. They also don't attach the same value judgments to attributes that society at large does. If your child says, "That man is FAT!" try not to project your embarrassment onto your child, or he will internalize that being fat (or brown, or short) is a bad thing to be. Consider it a teaching moment. You might say, "People come in all different shapes and sizes." Sometimes the target will let you off the hook, but sometimes they'll be offended. Saying a quick "sorry" and moving along is the most gracious way to deal with this situation. Ignoring a child who is saying rude things actually encourages them to speak louder and persist longer, which is uncomfortable for everyone.

## Frequently Asked Questions

**My son keeps picking up bad words at preschool. I want you to kick those kids out.** We look at using inappropriate language as a normal developmental event. Which isn't to say we encourage it, on the contrary. But if we kicked out every kid who does something inappropriate, we'd have no kids left. Making mistakes is how kids learn. Rest assured that we don't blithely let kids call each other stinky poopbrains. We don't.

**I said a four-letter word in front of my daughter once and now says it all the time, with the right inflection, in public!** Although they're not likely to advertise the fact, most people say inappropriate things in front of a child at one time or another. If she's really enjoying the attention it gives her, don't emphasize how BAD the word is. Give her an equally fun and outrageous word to use instead...something like, "Oh, *shooblehoffers*." Let her hear you say it "accidentally," and let

nature take its course. Reverse psychology is a great tool with preschoolers!

**My father-in-law has a foul mouth and he lets loose even when my kids are around.** You have some choices. First, ask him to monitor his language around the kids. If he's otherwise pleasant to be around, and your kids ask about his language, you might say, "Grandpa uses ugly words sometimes, it's true. But we have different rules for our family." If need be, you can point out other rules at Grandpa's house that are different.

**I think the words fart and butt are offensive but many people use them nowadays.** You can still set standards for your family. Your kids may not ever use the words if you don't (kids' are very attuned to their parents' speech, but if they try, you can explain you think the words are ugly and you don't want to hear them.