



Profanity in the Classroom

By Tom Jewett

Often, new teachers are shocked when they hear profanity and obscenity coming from the mouths of students, especially from younger children.

As surprised as you may be, try not to show or verbalize shock, if you hope to deal successfully with the problem. To the small child, using an obscene word is an experiment. An older child may be displaying defiance. Both age groups want to gain attention by shocking their audience—classmates and teacher. If you act shocked or respond indignantly, their goal is achieved.

Ignoring the behavior isn't the answer either. On the contrary, you must react. Profanity or "trash talking" is epidemic among young people. In 1999, New York State teachers named it their number one problem (Centner 2001). Profanity goes beyond disrespect in the classroom. Some studies have correlated profane verbal assaults with fighting among students. According to an April–June 2000 Gallup poll, 79 percent of 501 randomly selected 13–17-year-olds said that fights at their school were instigated by verbal conflicts (Centner 2001).

So, how should a new teacher react to student profanity? Immediate feedback through a show of disappointment and disapproval works, as long as a big deal is not made in front of the entire class. Avoid glamorizing the event. Instead, work with offenders individually. Let them know that you hold nothing against them personally, but that their language is unacceptable in your class and that you intend to help them correct this bad habit.

In their booklet, *Discipline—Classroom Control for Better Teaching*, longtime educators John and Lavona Dunworth (1989) stated that the most effective way to deal with profanity is

Tom Jewett, an associate professor at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois, and a member of the Chi Mu Chapter, has been an educator for 38 years, training preservice teachers and mentoring new teachers for the last 18 years.

to treat it as plain bad manners. They maintained the position that well-mannered, educated people

Laura Vernon isn't a teacher, but she believes students must be respectful in her school. "If you use a profane word around me, you have to apologize," she will tell offending students. Vernon, a security guard at North Division High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, strives to keep students on track with caring and consistency. "If you set parameters, they'll stay within those parameters. You just have to be consistent," she said.

—Derived from "The D Word" by Mary Ellen Flannery, *neatoday*, September 2005.

do not swear and that profanity in public places is offensive to others.

To help you handle a student's profanity, consider possible reasons behind the usage. Is it experimentation or showing off? Is the student imitating others or following behavior modeled at home? Whatever the reason for the improper language, your task is to help the student understand why he or she uses profanity. With awareness, the student can learn more acceptable ways to achieve his or her objectives and to voice expression—in your classroom and other places as well. 🍏

References

- Centner, P. 2001. Profanity explosion reveals how far we've fallen. *AFA Journal* September. Available at: www.afa.net/journal/september.
- Dunworth, J., and L. Dunworth. 1989. *Discipline—Classroom control for better teaching*. Fairfield, NJ: The Economics Press.