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## WHAT IT'S REALLY LIKE TO ADOPT

# Dropping the F-Bomb

When her 4-year-old uses a choice word, a mom decides that it's definitely time to clean up her act.

**I**t was raining lightly outside as I opened the garage door, ready to run a few errands with my 4-year-old son, Max, when he blurted out: "Hurry up, Mom. I hate getting f—king wet."

Did I really just hear that?

"What did you say?" I managed, weakly.

Max obliged. Yep, the f-bomb.

I looked at my son's adorable little face and had a hard time reconciling it with the unattractive language coming out of his mouth. At a loss for words, I got into the car and pulled out of the driveway in silence.

My head was spinning with questions: What in the world should I say? Would it be better to just ignore it? Would making a big deal of it simply backfire? And then: Why couldn't he have started with a more mild expletive, like a *hell* or a *damn*? Why did he immediately head to the top of the list with the f-word? Where did he pick up language like that?

Okay, on that last question, I didn't have to think too hard.

We had recently moved 700 miles, from the Midwest to the South. Let's just say the packing and unpacking—not to mention beginning a new life in a place where we knew no one—had

left me and my husband stressed. I realized that we had gotten careless about keeping our language in check. The finger of blame was pointed squarely at us. But what now?

When I got home, I talked to my husband, but he wasn't much help. Sure, he was shocked, but he also seemed somewhat impressed that Max had used his first curse word so fluently in a full sentence.

Meanwhile, I continued to agonize over the best way to react to the situation: I didn't want to create a double standard, telling my son not to swear when I often did so myself (albeit usually out of earshot). And how could I tell him that people should never swear when all around him he could easily hear a different story?

In the end, I chose to bring the subject up at bedtime

that night. I explained to Max that swearing was not appropriate for children. I told him that it was something grown-ups might do—like drinking coffee or watching R-rated movies—but that, really, swearing was inappropriate for adults too. I explained that there were consequences to using bad language. "If you use those words at school, you'll get into trouble," I told him. "And if you say curse words when you're at a friend's house, his parents may not like it and you might not get invited back."

He seemed to understand when I explained things in those terms, so I ended our discussion by telling him that Mommy and Daddy were going to try very hard not to use swear words anymore.

Now, I'm not exactly the world's most confident mom. I tend to overthink and second-guess all my parenting decisions. So later that night, I cracked open some of my child-rearing books to see whether I had done the right thing. I learned that, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, a child's language skills really begin to blossom at around age 4. Kids this age are discovering the power that their words have on others—and nothing taps into that quite like a four-letter word. Apparently, Max was

developmentally right on schedule.

Then I flipped through my well-worn copy of *Touchpoints: Three to Six*, by T. Berry Brazelton, M.D. He says the best way to react to a kid who uses swear words is to underreact—to give no response at all—then to talk to him later about why using these words is not acceptable. I was relieved to learn that my gut instinct had been right on target.

I'd like to end by saying that since then there's been no more swearing in our house. But I can't. For a few months, I carefully watched what I said. And Max didn't utter one bad word. Then, a few weeks ago, when we were in the car and I couldn't find parking after circling again and again, I slipped with the s-word. From the back seat came an echo. This time, I didn't need to ask for clarification. □

