

But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids

Why Are Some Words Bad?

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[00:00:21] This is But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids, from Vermont Public Radio. I'm Jane Lindholm. On this podcast, we take questions from curious kids just like you and we find answers or maybe suggestions or educated opinions and ideas.

[00:00:38] This week we're talking about words, specifically bad words. For the adults listening, don't turn this down. I promise. We won't actually say any swears, cuss or curse words, potty talk; however you characterize this kind of language in your family. Now, some of you listening might not really know any bad words. And that's great. But then again, maybe you have heard an adult around you say a word and then ask you not to repeat it. Or maybe you've heard another kid say a bad word. Maybe even some of you have said one of those bad words yourself and perhaps you've gotten in trouble for it. You have sent us questions about why these words exist and why they're often so powerful. And we thought these questions deserved their own episode because it's important to be able to talk about the things that are confusing or hard and even the things that make us or our adults uncomfortable. Here's who we found to guide us in this conversation.

[00:01:37] My name is Ben Bergen and I'm a professor at the University of California, San Diego. And I study language in the brain. Whenever we speak, it's because of signals that are sent from our brain. Whenever we understand words, it's because the signals that go into our ears and into our eyes get connected in our brain. And our brain allows us to understand how meaning works. It allows us to convey our messages. And it's the really smart control system at the middle of our bodies.

[00:02:10] Professor Bergen has also written a book all about bad words. It has a cheeky title, but the subtitle is *What Swearing Reveals* about our language, our brains and Ourselves. So, he has spent a lot of time studying bad words, why we use them and how we use them and what's going on in our brains when we say bad words.

[00:02:32] [Ben] You know, I became really interested in swearing when I became a parent. So, I have two kids who are five and two. And when my son was born, all of a sudden, I realized that I used some strong language as an adult that I felt a little bit uncomfortable with around this new child and I wanted to understand more about how that strong language worked. Does it cause harm to children to hear it? Why do we use it? Why does it feel so powerful? And so, I started doing some research.

[00:03:07] [Jane] Does it cause harm to children to hear or use bad language?

[00:03:10] As far as we can tell, there is no particular harm that it causes to children. So children hear lots of words and they find them ... Some of them exciting. They find some of them boring. They find some of them intriguing; interesting because maybe they provoke interesting reactions in the people around them. But for the most part, the words themselves don't cause any harm. The ... the thing that does cause harm, we know is when people talk to children in ways that make them feel bad about themselves. So, telling children that they are worthless or telling children that they're bad or threatening children.

We know that that can cause harm. But; it doesn't matter so much which words you use. What matters is the message that you're conveying.

[00:04:04] Hmm. Well, I hope we can get into a little bit more of that. But let's start with some of the questions that we have from our young listeners; because it will probably not surprise the kids who are listening and it will definitely not surprise any adults who are listening that we have a lot of questions from kids about bad words and why people use them and why kids can't use them. So, let's start with Dashiell.

[00:04:25] Hello, my name is Dashiell. I'm from North Carolina. And my question is: why are some bad, bad words ... Why are some words bad? Why? Why is the middle finger bad?

[00:04:41] My name is Logan and I am from Omaha. And my question is: why are some words bad?

[00:04:50] Why are some words bad?

[00:04:52] [Ben Bergen] That's a great question. It's very hard to give a single answer because; for each word, there's a different history. You know, words come into a language over the course of many, many, many years and centuries and they change. And so the way that a word is used at one time may change over the course of generations of people who use that word. Words in general, that are considered bad, tend to come from particular places. They tend to relate to parts of our lives that we don't like talking about in public. And in particular, they tend to relate to experiences of ... of like bathroom functions. So the things that you would do in a bathroom or to religious ideas. Sometimes they relate to other groups of people that we have negative feelings about. Those words, over time, they evolve. They change. So that not only do people not want to talk about those things, but they don't even want to say those words or hear those particular words.

[00:06:01] [Jane] What about the middle finger? I know you study words, but do you have a sense of why gestures, things that you do with your body could also be considered bad or those connected to the words?

[00:06:11] So the middle finger has a very long history. It's been used in the same way that we use it now for at least 2000 years. We know that the ancient Greeks used it. The ancient Romans used it. And it was very similar to what it is now. We think that it might have originally been used to represent a penis and that just as we don't like to show private parts in public in the same way, we don't like to show demonstrations of what private parties might look like in public.

[00:06:47] But over the course of time, it's just become a general term or a general gesture that is used to denigrate people or to show dislike for people. The middle finger isn't universal, though. In lots of other cultures there are different gestures that mean similar things. And in some places in the world, the middle finger doesn't mean what it means here at all.

[00:07:11] [Jane] That's so interesting because I think a lot of people will understand that to be true. That may be something that is not such a bad word in your family or in your culture, can be really bad or have a totally different meaning in somebody else's family or somebody else's culture. And Ben, even the things that you were talking about, like bathroom humor, some families are okay with that and some families aren't. And there are

maybe things that we say at home that are OK that we wouldn't say at school. So, it's interesting to think about the fact that words don't have a universal bad meaning or a universal bad sense to them or a good sense to them.

[00:07:50] [Ben Bergen] Yes. The ... the words that we think are bad, we think are bad because we learned that they are bad. We were told that by our parents or we noticed that they were bleeped out when we're listening to music or maybe we were even punished for using them. That's how we learned that those particular words are bad. But as you say, it may differ from family to family. I know that there are families that my children go to school with who have very different rules at home about what words they can say and what words they can't say. And certainly across time, the words that we think are bad words now were not bad words 100 or 200 years ago. And they won't be bad words in the future either.

[00:08:33] Are there historical bad words that don't really have any meaning now, so they're more just kind of fun; but that were really bad way back 200 years ago.

[00:08:42] Sure. There's a whole history of words that used to be really strong bad words; but that people have totally forgotten about. One of them is zounds.

[00:08:54] [Jane] Zounds ?

[Ben] Zounds, Yeah. That's a good one. Or Gadzooks.

[Jane] Gadzooks was bad.?

[00:09:01] [Ben] Gadzooks was really bad. It was a religious term. It comes from God's Hooks.

[Jane] Oh

[Ben] And it's meant to refer to the stigmata of Jesus on the cross. There's another one swive that I don't think anyone knows about any more. But that was the F-word back in Shakespeare's day.

[00:09:22] We have another question from Marin.

[00:09:24] I'm nine years old. I live in Evansville, Indiana. My question is, why aren't kids allowed to say bad words or cuss words?

[00:09:33] Why aren't kids allowed to say bad words or cuss words?

[00:09:38] That's a great question. Some kids are in some circumstances. So, it's important to remember that social rules change depending on who you are and where you are and who's around you.

[00:09:53] So, it's certainly true that in certain places people are expected not to use bad words. So, for example, in a classroom where there are adults around or with particular adults, maybe in your home, those are places where there's an expectation that people will talk in a certain way. And in our culture at this time, we've decided that those words are not appropriate for those circumstances. It's kind of like, you know, when you need to use the bathroom, there's a particular place that you use the bathroom in lots of other places that you don't. That's just how our society works. Um ... But there are certain places in certain times where kids can use strong words, in particular where there aren't people around who feel that it's inappropriate. So, when kids are just around other kids and everyone is

comfortable and making sure that they're keeping each other's feelings safe, then it's okay for those kids to use those words. And in some families at home, it's okay for kids to use strong words. So, it all it all depends.

[00:11:02] [Jane] I would also add that one of the jobs of the adults in your life is to try to teach you what's acceptable and what's not and how your behaviors and your language affect you and other people and what the consequences are of how you behave. And then when you're an adult, you have more freedom to make choices for yourself about what kind of words you're going to use. But those choices will be based on what you've learned from the adults in your life and from all of the people around you. In just a minute, we're going to talk about how kids are actually changing the way we use language and which words are considered bad. And we'll give you some ideas for how to talk to friends or adults. If you hear them using words you think are mean spirited.

[00:11:44] This is *But Why: A Podcast for Curious Kids*. I'm Jane Lindholm. And today, we're talking about bad words with Ben Bergen, who studies brain science and language. He's written a book all about how and why we use bad words. He was just saying that some kids are allowed to say bad words in some places, but not in others. And I wondered, couldn't it be confusing to kids that there are different rules for different places?

[00:12:09] [Ben] People definitely form habits. But children are really, really smart. And one of the things that their smartest about is figuring out. What, though, different rules are in different places. So, for example, there's a certain way that you dress when you go to church or when you go to your grandparents house. And that's different from the way that you dress when you go to bed or when you go to soccer practice. Those are just different rules about how you behave differently in different circumstances. And the same is true with language. It's pretty straightforward. By the time you're five or six, kids are very good at learning that there are different places with different rules, different people who have different expectations. And there are different ways to behave around those people and in those places. We also find that swearing more using these bad words more doesn't actually harm a child's vocabulary. So, kids sometimes are told, well, if you swear, then you won't use any better words. You'll just use that as an easy way to get your feelings across. And you won't ... you won't develop a big vocabulary with lots of words. And ... and ah, our evidence shows and the rest of ... there are a lot of experiments showing the same thing that that's not true at all. That children who are the best at using bad words are also the best at using the rest of language.

[Jane] Really?

[Ben] Yeah. We don't know if that's because of the bad words. It may or may not be. It may just be that children who are really interested in language are interested in all of the different kinds of language, including the bad words. And that shows up in their abilities. But we don't see any evidence at all that swearing becomes such a habit that it interferes with the rest of language development.

[00:14:04] [Jane] We have been sort of talking about this the whole time, but I'm going to let Bela put a fine point on basically what we're talking about here, Ben.

[00:14:12] I'm eight years old and I live in Houston, Texas. And my question is, why do people say bad words?

[00:14:19] So if we've talked about the fact that these words are considered bad, at least in certain places, why do people say them?

[00:14:27] Oftentimes people say bad words because they're experiencing very strong emotions. And these bad words are very tightly linked to our emotions. We've learned since we were very, very young that when people are excited, frustrated, really, really happy, angry, sad that these are the words that they use. And so when we have these strong emotions, we often use them as well.

[00:14:55] That's whether you stub your toe or fall off your bike or ... or your favorite football team scores a touchdown. People also use these words to show how interesting or clever or funny they are. People seem to generally find that people who use bad words are ...are more likable, are funnier. Now there are downsides, too. People find that people who use bad words are also more out of control. And so, it's possible that there are good sides and bad sides to using bad words. But ... but I think that one reason that people use them is to show that they are part of a group of people who use these words.

[00:15:45] I can sort of remember the first few times that I used a bad word in front of an adult. And part of it, for me, was just trying to see what happens when I use that word. What does that adult do? What are they going to say to me? What does their face look like? And I have found that some of the young people in my life also when they use a really bad word, they're using it to try to shock me or shock another adult. Do you see that happening as well?

[00:16:15] Oh, yes. Adults are the biggest culprits, really, of children using bad words; because we react. Children are very clever and they are very curious and they want to know what is the world like. And there is nothing more interesting than being able to provoke a reaction in an adult. We react in lots of different ways to children, who use bad words. We make funny faces. We try to suppress strong reactions. We say things, we yell we scream. We do all kinds of all kinds of things. And that is a very powerful thing for a child to be able to do to make it to make an adult react like that. I think that that's an important reason. But children need to be able to experiment.

[00:17:09] They need to be able to find out how their actions affect the world around them. And so, as adults, the best thing we can do is to show them that ... what the invisible rules are about these words. To show them that there are certain places where maybe this is OK in our family. And there are certain times when this isn't frowned upon; but that there are other places where the reactions are going to be quite negative. That teachers and priests and various other people aren't going to look kindly on a person who's using those words and to share the knowledge that the adults have about what people feel about these words in different circumstances.

[00:17:52] [Jane] One of the rules we have in my house with my kids is that words that are considered bad words or curse words, we will sometimes allow those words are generally don't care as much about those words if they're not spoken in a mean way. But the words that we would prefer our kids not to use are words that are going to hurt somebody else's feelings, make them feel bad, make them feel bad about themselves or in some way or another, even if it's not a curse word, make that person feel sad about who they are. Do you have any advice for kids and families about how to think about words that are, quote unquote bad and how and when to use them?

[00:18:34] Well, every family has to decide what its own internal rules and guidelines are. It is true that at least as far as what we understand from the science, that. It's not the words themselves that are harmful; but as you say, it's the way that they're used. There are lots of ways that you can use bad words in good ways. I think that the message that you've described is exactly the same message that we have in my house. You know, I have two children and the message is always that we keep other people's feeling safe with our words. And ... and that's basically it. The specific words that kids use; yes they ... yes they can be reacted to. But, those reactions are part of what you need to learn. You need to learn that you. Okay. Your parents may not react strongly to this particular word when it's at home, but they might react very strongly if you say it when you're out in public. That type of knowledge about how words work differently in different places is the most important thing that I think kids can learn.

[00:19:44] [Jane] Here's something else you might be interested to learn. You have a lot of power when it comes to language.

[00:19:50] [Ben] The next generation of bad words will be invented by today's kids.

[Jane] Ah Oh!

[Ben] Right. So, children in general don't find the words that their parents dislike as bad as their parents do. They internalize the idea. They understand. Oh, yes. My parents don't like this word. That's fine. But the words that they're going to start using to express their strong emotions, to show what social group they're in, to show that they're clever and funny and so on. Those are words that their parents haven't even dreamed of yet. And those are words that when ... when today's kids are parents, they will be trying to keep their kids from saying themselves.

[00:20:37] [Jane] If as a kid, there are words that you think are bad and you hear maybe the adults in your life using them. Or you think they're using words that are mean-spirited. How can you talk to adults about words that you think are bad that maybe they shouldn't be using?

[00:20:53] [Ben] Kids are creating the language of the future. And so, you are well within your rights to tell adults how you feel the language is ... is going to be. How ... how you respond to the words that they're using. And in particular, if you think that words are being used to hurt feelings or to cause harm, to make someone feel small or less or powerless, that's something that you can tell parents and you can use those very words to describe it. You can say this word makes people feel smaller, powerless. It's ... it's a thing that's causing people harm. And you can convey that message to them. Now, you're not necessarily in charge of what they do; but communicating that message to them is part of explaining to them what your experience is like. And many adults will want to change their behavior, in order to make children feel more comfortable.

[00:21:49] That was Benjamin Bergen, an author and a professor of cognitive science. That's brain science at the University of California, San Diego. Melody and I really love hearing about how *But Why* sparks conversations within families and in classrooms. So, we would love it if you use this episode as a way to talk to the people in your life about language and word choices.

[00:22:11] If you aren't sure about the rules around bad words in your house, for example, maybe it's time to find out and maybe you can ask the people who are much older than

you about how they've seen words change in meaning over the course of their lifetime. As always, we love hearing what else you're curious about too. So, if you have a question or a topic you'd like to see us tackle. Have an adult record you telling us about it. Then they can send the file to questions@butwhykids.org. *But Why* is produced by Melody Bodette and me Jane Lindholm at Vermont Public Radio. Our theme music is by Luke Reynolds. We'll be back in two weeks with an all new episode. Until then, stay curious.