

# When Moms Say Bad Words: Family and Peer Influences on the Frequency of Swearing

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## Conclusions

- While the influence of peers on how often an individual swears is strongly correlated, the influence of one’s mother is more strongly correlated. Therefore, our hypothesis was proven incorrect.
- Data from Steinberg and Monahan (2007) included samples of 3,600 males and females, ages 10-30. Results showed that resistance to peer pressure increases between ages 14-18. For this reason, the results of our study are understandable. Participants were all undergraduate students, with an average age of about 19. At younger ages, peer pressure could influence swearing habits more so than one’s mother—the opposite of what has been found for individuals ages 19 and up. Those with insecure or unhealthy mother-child relationships had higher levels of conflict than individuals who possessed secure mother-child attachments. The conflict was associated with a high level of externalizing problems (Fu, 2015). A child whose mother does not specify words that are not okay to say, and perhaps does not discipline when those words are said, will be likely to act out and use inappropriate language. During infancy, children who had longer face to face interaction with their mother, and higher levels of pleasure, showed fewer external problems in behavior at the 2 year mark (Mirjami, et al., 2015).
- The limitations of this study included the sample size being comprised solely of university students, which means the results cannot be generalized to the overall population. In addition, the majority of participants were females, so the results may be skewed due to the lack of male perspective. Therefore, our results can only be confidently applied to female university students in the age range of 18-25 years old. The test was not conducted in a lab with a researcher present. There could be no control over the honesty of participants’ answers, the amount of effort put into the survey, what participants were doing while taking the survey, or their mental state at the time of completion.

## Objective

The present study hypothesized that frequent exposure to swear words from peers would be more influential regarding one’s swearing habits than early exposure to swear words from family members.



## Background

Swearing is also known as the act of using taboo language. Words considered taboo come from any of the following categories: offensive words and phrases, insults or name-calling, clinical terms, and abusive expressions (Jay & Jay, 2013). Rassin and Muris (2005) found that the expression of negative emotions is the strongest reason for swearing. Patrick (1901) discussed the use of profanity as the expression of anger, used also when one’s wellbeing is threatened. If outside influences contributing to swearing are too strong on a person, and their taboo language is left unaddressed, he/she could experience challenges in life—especially regarding making a living and being self-sufficient. The contrasting argument states that swearing can have a positive impact since it increases the speaker’s perceived depth of feeling and positive attitude while decreasing feelings of frustration (Scherer, 2007). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977) speculates that we learn behavior by observing the actions of others, as well as the consequences associated with those actions. Influences tend to be even more prominent when the influencer is another peer, instead of a family member or older figure in a child’s life. This phenomenon is known as peer pressure. Young children are also sensitive to information provided by adults—which words are okay to say and which words are off limits (Haun & Tomasello, 2011). Strong conformity to peers’ behavior, even when the child knows better, has been recorded in school-age kids and adolescents (Haun & Tomasello, 2011).

## Method



	Frequency
Married	63.6% ( <i>n</i> = 485)
Divorced	17% ( <i>n</i> = 130)
Remarried	12.6% ( <i>n</i> = 96)
Never Married	6.8% ( <i>n</i> = 52)

	Frequency
Male	34.3% ( <i>n</i> = 262)
Female	65.7% ( <i>n</i> = 501)

This study was a part of a larger study on the factors related to the use of profanity. Data was originally collected from 818 undergraduate students from a large diverse southeastern public research university. However, the subset of participants assessed in the current study included 763 participants for whom complete data was available regarding peer and family influences on swearing. Participants were recruited through psychology courses and received research credit or class extra credit for their participation. Participants were first asked questions about their personality characteristics, religiosity, swearing exposure, swearing history, and attitudes regarding swearing, followed by general demographic questions.

## Results

**Swearing Exposure:** The mother was the primary source of swearing exposure not only from family sources (e.g., father, siblings) but also in comparison to social sources of swearing exposure.



**Peer and Family Influence on Swearing Usage:** A linear regression analysis was conducted to determine how one’s swearing usage is predicted by levels of exposure to peers’ and family’s swearing habits. The overall model was significant,  $F(5, 757) = 12.72, p = .00, R^2 = .08$ . The dependent variable measuring how frequently individuals currently swear was significant, based on exposure to swear words from one’s mother—  $t(5,757) = -6.89, p = .00$ — and peers:  $t(5,757) = -2.56, p = .01$ .

Table 1. *Swearing Exposures*

Source	% ( <i>n</i> )
Family: Mother	64.5 (492)
Father	4.6 (35)
Sibling(s)	6.9 (53)
Social: Friends	2.8 (21)
Peers	5.5 (42)

*Note:* data represent those who participants heard swear most frequently

Table 2. *Regression Coefficients*

	Swearing Frequency
Mother	-.24*
Father	-.02
Friends	-.02
Peers	-.09*
Siblings	.001
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.08
<i>F</i>	12.72*

\**p* <.05



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