

# Memories of Punishment for Cursing

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**Abstract** Researchers do not know how parents respond to children's cursing or what effect parents' responses have on children later in life. We conducted two studies with college students: a content analysis of 47 personal narratives of childhood cursing and an item analysis of a 70-item questionnaire administered to 211 students. Contrary to gender differences found in previous narrative and cursing research, men's narratives were as emotional as women's narratives, and women used as many curse words as men. The two studies confirm that cursing is a common childhood problem and that mothers play a more prominent disciplinary role than fathers do. Parents respond with physical forms of punishment (e.g., spanking) but not as frequently as verbal reprimands. Our data are the first to document the prevalence of washing children's mouths with soap. College students have vivid memories of punishment; however 94% reported that they continue to curse.

**Keywords** Gender differences · Child discipline · Cursing · Punishment · Memory · Parenting · Narrative

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Cursing, broadly defined, refers to the use of taboo, vulgar, profane, offensive, scatological, or obscene language. Researchers, with some exceptions (e.g., Jay, 1992, 2000), have given scant attention to cursing despite the frequent problems with public cursing reported in popular media (e.g., Angier, 2005; Ungaro, 1997). Cursing is a society-wide problem associated with psychopathology (e.g., obscene phone callers, Tourette syndrome), racial discrimination, hate crimes, road rage, sexual harassment, child and spouse abuse, mass communication standards, and adult-child conflict in educational and home settings. Due to sociocultural concerns about cursing by children and questions about the effects of exposing children to taboo language, one would think that researchers would have incorporated cursing into theories of child development or language acquisition, but this is not the case. Researchers have produced no data regarding how children learn to curse. We do know that parents are reluctant to discuss sex, excretory functions, and other troublesome topics with young children, but we do not know how adults respond to children's cursing (see Berges, Neiderbach, Rubin, Sharpe, & Tesler, 1983; Jay, 1998). A better understanding of the caregiver's role in determining the appropriateness of a child's behavior will lead to a better understanding of how curse words emerge as a unique class of emotionally offensive words that are not to be repeated in "polite company."

What we *do* know about cursing is that children start cursing as soon as they learn to speak, somewhere between 1 and 2 years of age, and that cursing persists into old age, despite infirmities such as brain damage or dementia (Jay, 1992, 1996). Gender differences in cursing are common (Jay, 1992, 2000); for example, boys use more offensive language, do so more frequently, and have a more extensive

production vocabulary than girls do. Gender-related differences in cursing continue into old age, but may alter course in the nursing home setting, where one hears more women than men cursing (Jay, 1996). Roughly two-thirds of all cursing episodes are associated with emotion states of anger or frustration for children and adults (Jay, 1992, 2000). Children curse because they have learned that cursing is a means of coping with stress. We suspect that parental responses to children's cursing, through the process of classical conditioning, may account for early acquisition and persistence phenomena. Curse words operate originally as neutral stimuli, but when paired with punishment, they acquire long-lasting emotional connotations (e.g., fear or anxiety). Following punishment, a curse word should evoke a mild emotional reaction related to the events in the original punishment scenario. Part of the meaning of a curse word is this classically-conditioned component (see Jay, 2003). We think that children learn the aversive consequences associated with cursing as efficaciously as rats learn about aversive stimuli in laboratory settings. How could a child *not* remember having to suck on a bar of soap for saying a curse word?

We thought that asking college students about episodes of childhood cursing would elicit detailed narratives because it is well established that people have better memories for emotional events than for nonemotional events (e.g., Adolphs, Tranel, & Buchanan, 2005; Brown & Kulik, 1977). The literature on personal narratives shows that asking people to tell personal stories effectively produces a variety of emotional information (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Gender differences are often obtained. Women provide longer, more detailed, and more emotionally laden narratives (more emotion words and references to emotions) than men do (Buckner & Fivush, 1998; de Vries, Blando, & Walker, 1995; Dosser, Balswick, & Halverson, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Golombok & Fivush, 1994; Holmberg & Veroff, 1991; Johnstone, 1993; Niedzwienska, 2003; Ross & Holmberg, 1990; Schwartz, 1984; Sprecher & Sedikides, 1993; Thorne, 1995). Developmentally speaking, the differences in narrative organization emerge in early childhood and continue into adulthood (Buckner & Fivush, 1998). This body of narrative research suggests that women's cursing narratives should be longer (more words) and more emotionally laden (more emotion words and references to emotion) than men's.

We suspect that parents' responses to cursing episodes reflect established child rearing practices. Child rearing practices have been found to impact children's expression of emotion. Mothers and fathers do not participate equally in child rearing (Maccoby, 1998). According to Maccoby (1998), mothers carry out most of the child-rearing chores and are more likely to be present when discipline needs

arise. It is interesting that mothers are more likely than fathers to be the victims of children's coercive attacks (Patterson, 1982). Adams, Kuebli, Boyle and Fivush (1995) found that mothers and fathers did not differ from each other on the use of emotional language; however, both talked more about emotions with daughters than with sons. Maccoby found that fathers issue more imperatives (e.g., *Stop that!*) and use other forms of power-assertion more often than mothers when they talk to their children. Fathers are more likely to use name-calling, disparaging remarks, direct threats, and pejorative names with their sons than their daughters (Gleason, 1987). Fathers confront children and enforce discipline more than mothers when the need arises. Mothers are more even-handed when disciplining sons and daughters, but fathers are more controlling and physically punitive toward their sons (see Lytton & Romney, 1991; Mosby, Rawls, Meehan, Mays, & Pettinari, 1999). Although fathers appear to be more physically punitive than mothers, the majority of studies of parenting strongly suggest that mothers would be more involved than fathers in disciplining children for cursing.

We hypothesized that college students would readily remember being punished for cursing in childhood, but that women would produce longer (more words) and more emotional narratives (more emotion words and references to emotions) than men would. Men were expected to use more curse words in their narratives than women were. We hypothesized that mothers would provide more discipline for cursing than fathers would, for example, mothers would be mentioned more frequently as responding to cursing than fathers would. We suspected that, because childhood cursing problems are ubiquitous and perennial, disciplinary approaches to cursing are essentially ineffective. One purpose for conducting the current research was to offer some advice regarding more effective parenting practices. Study 1 was designed to gather personal narratives about punishment for cursing. On the basis of these narratives we then constructed a detailed questionnaire on punishment for cursing, which we used in study 2.

## Study 1

### Method

*Participants* As we were uncertain about which would be the most effective means of getting participants to describe their cursing episodes, we used both oral and written formats. Participants in the written group ( $n=24$ , 14 women, 10 men) were college students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at a small liberal arts

college in Massachusetts. During recruitment students were told that the study involved perceptions of offensive language. In the study participants were told that they would be asked to recall an episode from childhood where they were punished for cursing. Participants were native English speakers who ranged in age from 18 to 37 years ( $M=20.8$  years). Approximately one-half of the participants were instructed by a male researcher and one-half were instructed by a female researcher. Participants in the oral group ( $n=23$ , 12 women, 11 men) were college students enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course at a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. However, the oral group participated individually, not in groups, approximately one-half with a male and one-half with a female researcher. Participants were native English speakers who ranged in age from 18 to 22 years ( $M=19.3$ ). The campus population was 92% White, 7% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Asian at the time of data collection. All participants received course credit for participation. None dropped out of the study.

*Procedure* Written narratives were collected from small groups of two to eight people. Participants were asked to describe an incident from childhood when they got into trouble for cursing. The written group wrote their narratives in “blue books.”

Participants received a written list of five narrative-related prompts to help them recall while writing their stories. The prompts were “Can you remember anything else about cursing in your house?”, “How did your mother usually react?”, “How did your father usually react?”, “Did you ever get in a lot of trouble?”, “Did your brothers or sisters or neighbors ever get you into trouble with cursing?” Participants in the written group were told to look at the list of prompts if they got stuck during the writing session. We did not monitor their use of the prompts, but most writers seemed to pay little attention to the list. Sessions for the written narratives ranged from 15 to 30 min in length.

Oral narratives were tape-recorded for transcription purposes. The participant spoke his or her narrative into a tape recorder, and the researcher was seated out of sight, about 8 ft behind the participant. The list of five prompts used in the written procedure was posted on the wall in front of the participants just above the tape recorder. If a participant stopped talking, the researcher read one of the prompts aloud in the order they appeared on the list. Most of the participants had to be prompted at least once, but we did not give all prompts to all participants. Oral sessions ended when the participants indicated that they had nothing more to add to the story. Sessions in the oral formats took between 15 and 40 min to complete.

Written narratives were scored on the basis of their original (blue book) content. Oral narratives were tran-

scribed to text and scored for content. Narrative contents were summarized on “score sheets,” which were developed after a preliminary analysis of the content of the oral narratives in a manner similar to previous research on narratives (see Buckner & Fivush, 1998). See Appendix I.

The discourse analysis extracted three dependent variables: total number of words in the narrative (the total word length of the narrative, counting all words produced), number of emotion words (all names for emotions, and positive or negative feeling states, e.g., angry, flipped out), and number of curse words (obscenities, profanities, names, insults, generally offensive words). In addition we outlined situational or contextual information. The discourse analysis and the score sheets (see Appendix I) were designed to elucidate two situational factors: the part of the narratives that described home environment, including parenting practices, and the nature of the focal punishment episode described. The variables were selected after a preliminary summary of the content (i.e., the who, what, where, how, and when) of both written and oral narratives. The situational information covered rules about cursing, family members’ cursing habits, types of punishment used by parents, as well as the particulars of the focal episode (if there was one) that included punishment and the context of the episode (e.g., who was involved, what was said, and where and when it occurred). The situational and discourse variables were defined and were scored the same way for both oral and written narratives. Each narrative was scored for the presence or absence of each variable mentioned above. We also noted participants’ demeanor during the story telling (e.g., nervous laughter or asking permission to say a curse word). Narratives were scored independently by the authors with an interrater reliability at the  $r=0.94$  level. We later conferred and resolved by consensus all disagreements about interpretation of the data or its scoring.

## Results

A univariate ANOVA was performed for three discourse dependent variables: total number of words (length), number of curse words, and number of emotion words for each form of narrative. The mean length of written narratives was 267 words ( $SD=109$ ) with a mean of 3.38 emotion words ( $SD=3.3$ ) and a mean of 1.92 curse words ( $SD=2.2$ ). Contrary to traditional research, there were no significant differences as a function of participant gender for any of the three discourse variables.

The mean length of oral narratives was 579 words ( $SD=273$ ), with mean of 4.70 emotion words ( $SD=3.7$ ) and a mean of 3.43 curse words ( $SD=3.1$ ). Although the oral

narratives were significantly longer than the written ones,  $F(1, 46)=26.87, p<0.001$ , oral narratives did not produce a significantly greater percentage of emotion words or curse words relative to written narratives. There were no significant differences as a function of participant gender for total words, curse words, or emotion words. As an additional gender analysis we counted the number of words each participant produced before being prompted by the researcher, and this analysis also produced no significant differences as a function of participant gender.

The curse words women used in their narratives support the notion that women have a vibrant cursing vocabulary, at least as extensive as men's. Women generated 23 different curse word types (in 9,728 total words), whereas men produced 17 different types (in 10,001 total words). These ratios are not significantly different. The emotion word data support the notion that men have a rich emotional vocabulary, at least as extensive as women's. Men generated 41 different emotion words, and women generated 37 different words. These ratios are not significantly different. These data do not support previous findings that men curse more frequently than women do or that women use more emotion words than men do in cursing narratives.

Most participants' households (66%) had rules against cursing. Men and women did not differ in reporting the presence of rules. Most mothers (66%) and fathers (51%) were described as cursing or cursing a lot at home. There was no significant difference between the proportion of mothers and fathers who cursed and those who did not curse at home. Men and women did not differ in the degree to which they reported the incidence of mothers or fathers cursing. It is also noteworthy that many participants mentioned other adults, brothers, or sisters who cursed at home.

Parents' reactions to cursing included a wide range of behaviors. Verbal reprimands were more common than physical forms of punishment by both mothers (64%) and fathers (34%). The ratios were not significantly different. However, based on the total number of reports about mothers and about fathers, mothers (65 reports) were remembered as more responsive than fathers (48 reports) to their children's cursing.

Mothers employed more physical forms of punishment (16 reports) for cursing than fathers did (3 reports),  $X^2(1, N=94)=7.5, p<0.01$ . We also found incidences of washing the mouth out with soap as a form of punishment. Twenty percent of the narratives included soap (or Tabasco sauce) in the mouth as a punishment. It is interesting that only mothers were reported to have used soap as a punishment. Mothers (15%) and fathers (3%) did not differ in their use of other forms of physical punishment (e.g., spanking or hitting).

One way to compare mothers' and fathers' parenting practices is to look at relative proportions of different forms of punishment. If we focus on the proportion of verbal reprimands to no responses for mothers and compare it to fathers, we find that these proportions are significantly different,  $X^2(1, N=94)=12.2, p<0.001$ . The proportion of physical reprimands to no responses is also significantly different for mothers and fathers,  $X^2(1, N=94)=6.75, p<0.01$ . These data support the idea that mothers are remembered as being more responsive to children's cursing than fathers are. It should be noted that other adults also were implicated in responses to cursing (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, neighbors, teachers).

The age of the participants at the time of the incidents described were between 9 and 13 years ( $M=11.5$  years for women and 10 for men). Narratives about young children (12 years) involved the words *crap*, *goddamn*, *fuck*, *hell*, *shit*, and *slut*. Narratives about older children and adolescents involved the words *bitch*, *fuck*, *motherfucker*, and *shit*. Both groups reported getting into trouble for using obscenities (e.g., *fuck*) and insults (e.g., *bitch*), but only younger children got into trouble for using profanities (e.g., *goddamn*) and mild oaths (e.g., *crap*). A common motive for cursing was to imitate someone (37%). Other motives included anger or frustration (31%). The participants who described how they felt at the time mainly referenced negative emotions such as anger (33%), frustration or upset (33%), or one of the following: fear (11%), hate (11%), or guilt (11%). The targets of these outbursts were equally distributed over mothers, fathers, other relatives, friends, and classmates. The majority (68%) of the episodes recalled took place in the home. In 62% of the narratives, the way the authority figures learned of the cursing was identified. Most of the parents (76%) witnessed the incident directly. Other parents were informed when another child tattled on the participant or when the participant confessed. The parent most often involved was the mother acting alone (53%). The father responded alone in 19% of the episodes described, and both parents responded in 16% of the episodes. The three proportions were significantly different,  $X^2(2, N=94)=6.86, p<0.05$ . Participants in 62% of the narratives mentioned how the parents reacted to the cursing episode. The most common reaction was a verbal reprimand (41%). Soap in the mouth was mentioned in 20% of the episodes, and physical punishments were described in 14%.

## Discussion

We demonstrated that college students have memories of cursing during childhood and of their parents' reactions

to those episodes. Most of our participants' parents established anti-cursing rules in their homes but ended up breaking their own rules. Mothers played a more prominent disciplinary role than fathers did, as in Maccoby (1998). When children did break the rules regarding cursing, their infractions usually resulted in verbal reprimands, as opposed to physical forms of punishment. Physical forms of punishment and mouth soaping are not infrequent, however, as 20% of our sample had had their mouths soaped. It is interesting that only mothers used disciplinary soaping in our narratives.

We found that men talked and emoted as much as women during the task and that women produced as many curse words in their narratives as men did. One explanation for gender effects is that participants reconstruct past experiences to fit stereotypical gender role beliefs (see Gibbons, Traxel, Vogl, & Grimes, 2002). However, the cursing narrative task may be different than previous narrative subject matter. It may suggest to men that they can emote openly about their cursing and to women that they are as free as men to use curse words. In the final analysis, the narrative technique left many questions unanswered about the details of the family life (e.g., Was the child raised in a two parent home? Were siblings involved?). Study 1 produced sufficient data to create a questionnaire, but the findings needed to be replicated with a larger sample.

## Study 2

Based on the results of study 1, a questionnaire was designed to document in more detail college students' memories of punishment for cursing during childhood and how contemporary parental discipline affected current behavior and attitudes.

## Method

*Participants* Participants were 211 college students (111 women and 100 men) who were native English speakers. Eighty-two (42 women and 40 men) were from a small public liberal arts college in western Massachusetts with a campus population that was 92% White, 7% Black, 2% Hispanic, and 1% Asian at the time of data collection. The remaining 129 participants (69 women and 60 men) were from a large private university in New York City with a campus population that was 70% White, 14% Asian, 5% Black, and 5% Hispanic at the time of data collection. The mean age of all participants was 20.4 years, and the

majority of them (86 women, 83 men) were raised in two-parent homes.

*Procedure* At the liberal arts college, participants were recruited through an Introductory Psychology participant pool procedure and were given course credit for participation. They participated in small groups of 10–20 people. Participants from the university were recruited through solicitation in residence halls and were given lottery tickets to win food items as thanks for their participation. University students were given surveys on an individual basis, and they returned them to a mailbox after completion. The survey took about 40 min to complete.

*Questionnaire* The questionnaire was developed on the basis of information gathered in study 1. In particular we were looking for more detailed information about participants' home life (e.g., what kinds of rules and restrictions parents developed for watching or listening to media with explicit content) and the specifics of the cursing episodes they remembered from childhood. The questionnaire contains 70 items, which covered demographic information and situational aspects of cursing as well as current attitudes toward cursing. The questions were written in an eight-page booklet. Participants were instructed to circle the alternative (e.g., yes or no, or never-sometimes-a lot-all the time) that most accurately described their experiences with cursing.

Five demographic questions ask about gender, age, number of brothers, number of sisters, and who raised the participant. Nine items ask about family policies about cursing (questions 1–9). Seven items address the mother's involvement in childhood cursing, and these were rephrased and repeated to address the father's involvement (questions 10–23). Five items address adults' responses to the participant's cursing (questions 24–28). Five items address a sister's involvement, and these were rephrased and repeated to address a brother's involvement (questions 29–38). Nineteen items were developed to ask for information about a specific cursing episode from childhood (questions 39–57). Finally, eight items ask about participants' current attitudes toward cursing (questions 58–64), and an open-ended question asks for general comments about cursing and/or the questionnaire. See Appendix II.

After the questionnaires were completed, they were scored by the authors. We counted the frequencies for each alternative for each question, and the data were entered in an SPSS computer data file for analysis. There were only minor discrepancies (e.g., which alternative a participant intended to circle) regarding the scoring of items on a few questionnaires. Discrepancies were resolved by the consensus of the three authors.

## Results and Discussion

As we hypothesized, 71% of our participants indicated that their parents had had rules regarding cursing in the home. Forty-three percent reported that they were only allowed to curse sometimes without punishment; 43% were never allowed to curse without punishment. Only 26% reported that cursing rules were based on religion. As for media use at home, most people reported that they had had restrictions on television, movies, and music that contained cursing. The numbers of participants who reported restrictions for television (88%), for movies (94%), and for music (79%) were not significantly different ( $p > 0.05$ ). The majority of participants reported that they were never allowed to curse in the presence of adults (74%), to curse at children (82%), or to curse at their parents (87%).

Although parents made the rules that prohibit cursing in the home, both mothers (77%) and fathers (79%) did themselves curse from time to time. We compared the mothers' responsiveness to cursing to the fathers' responsiveness to cursing. Only 13% of the mothers were viewed as never having responded to cursing, whereas 26% fathers had never responded. This is a significant difference,  $X^2(1, N=204)=11.56, p < 0.001$ . Forty-seven percent of the mothers responded "a lot" or "all the time" compared to 33% of the fathers. This is also a significant difference,  $X^2(1, N=204)=8.61, p < 0.01$ .

When directly asked about which parent punished cursing, 54% of the participants indicated that their mothers usually punished them, and 27% indicated that their fathers usually punished them, which is a significant difference,  $X^2(1, N=172)=18.23, p < 0.001$ . Verbal reprimands were the most popular form of punishment (83% of mothers and 67% of fathers), followed by loss of privileges (48% of mothers and 41% of fathers), physical punishment (27% of mothers and 22% of fathers), spanking (25% of mothers and 23% of fathers), and soap in the mouth (21% of mothers and 7% of fathers). Mothers and fathers differed only on the soap in the mouth as a punitive response,  $X^2(1, N=207)=18.30, p < 0.001$ ; mothers were more likely than fathers to use soap.

Sixty-two percent of the participants were raised with one or more brothers, and 66% were raised with one or more sisters. Thirty-two percent of the participants had a sister who cursed during childhood. Both mothers (76% of the time) and fathers (61% of the time) punished sisters. Thirty-five percent of the participants had brothers who cursed. As with the data on sisters, mothers (69% of the time) and fathers (67% of the time) were involved in the punishment. When asked who punished sisters more severely, 54% chose mothers, and 35% chose fathers. When asked who punished brothers more severely, 51%

chose mothers, and 40% chose fathers. These data indicate that mothers of participants are more involved than fathers in punishing the participants' siblings.

Most of our participants (71%) did remember an episode where an adult had responded to their cursing, but 12% did not remember an episode, and 16% were not sure. The mean age at the time of the incident for men was 9.3 years, with a range of 5 to 17 years. For women the mean age was 9.2 years, with a range of 3 to 20 years. Thirty-four percent of the respondents indicated that their mother was present, both parents were present in 14% of the cases, but the father alone was present in only 7% of the cases. There were also a substantial number of cases (29%) where neither parent was present. Mothers (46%) were more responsive than fathers (13%), grandparents (3%), neighbors (2%), or others (16%). The proportion of mothers versus fathers who were aware of the cursing is significantly different,  $X^2(1, N=126)=38.89, p < 0.001$ . The adult involved was more likely to hear the cursing directly (61% of the time) than to learn of it because someone reported the incident (20%). The reporters were sisters (27%), friends (20%), brothers (6%), neighbors (6%), or others (41%).

Most of the episodes took place in the home (54%), followed by neighborhoods (13%), schools (9%), and playgrounds (4%). The cause of the cursing was a situation (49%) or a person (33%). The target of the cursing could have been one of several people: mothers were more likely targets (29%) than "others" (24%), friends (15%), sisters (13%), brothers (12%), or fathers (7%). The target data confirm previous research that indicates that children are more likely verbally to abuse their mothers than their fathers,  $X^2(1, N=27)=10.70, p < 0.002$ .

The emotional cause of the cursing was anger or frustration (53%), more so than humor (9%), pain (6%), mimic (5%), revenge (2%), or other causes (7%). Participants also experienced a range of feelings following the cursing episode; these feelings included embarrassment (21%), anger or frustration (19%), relief (16%), happiness (8%), or "other" feelings (18%). The majority of cursing involved a small number of words that occur repeatedly; for example, 46% of the episodes involved one of these two words: fuck (25%) or shit (21%).

When questioned directly about the authority figure involved in the episode, participants were more likely to remember their mothers (57%) than their fathers (19%), teachers (11%), "others" (7%), neighbors (3%), or grandparents (3%). The difference between mothers' and fathers' involvement in the episode was significant,  $X^2(1, N=125)=31.75, p < 0.001$ . Participants reported that the authority figure was more likely to react (73%) than not to react (8%) to the cursing and that they were more likely to be punished (55%) than not to be punished (27%). Verbal reprimands

were more popular (38%), than soap (6%), loss of privileges (6%), physical punishment (5%), spanking (4%), or “other” (5%). These data confirm a preference for verbal reprimands and loss of privileges over soap in the mouth and spanking.

When asked how their punisher reacted to them after the punishment, most (36%) thought that the punisher had been angry or frustrated. Other reactions included relief (7%), embarrassment (5%), happiness (2%), and “other” (14%). When the participants were asked how they felt after being punished, they reported that they had been angry or frustrated (31%), embarrassed (25%), relieved (3%), happy (1%), or “other” (7%). When asked to describe what happened to their cursing in terms of frequency of occurrence after the episode, most said that their cursing increased (42%) or stayed the same (15%); only 23% reported that it decreased, which shows that the long term efficacy of parents’ punishment techniques was not high.

One of the more interesting aspects of the survey was how childhood experiences with cursing affected college students’ current attitudes. Most of the participants (52%) thought that people curse out of habit, learned to curse from parents (12%) or siblings (6%), or cursed to “fit in” (11%). Only a small percentage of the participants regarded television (6%) or movies (4%) as causal factors. The overwhelming majority of our participants (94%) said that they curse sometimes or frequently. Many of our participants thought cursing is okay (42%) or even good for people (9%); 18% thought that cursing is bad. However, 82% thought that there was too much cursing in our culture. The majority (77%) thought that children should be punished for cursing; 21% did not think that children should be punished. Fifty-four percent preferred verbal reprimands, loss of privileges and grounding (15%) to spanking (5%), or soap in the mouth (4%). These preferences were confirmed when participants were asked how they would punish their own children: verbal reprimands (55%), physical and spanking (5%), loss of privileges or grounding (12%), and soaping (3%).

The majority of the responses to the open ended question (Please use the last page to tell us anything else you would like us to know about your experiences with cursing.) were suggestions to improve the questionnaire or were comments about being punished for cursing (“I remember feeling terrified if I cursed in front of my mom until I was in my late teens.”). Finally, an item by item analysis to compare frequency distributions of women’s answers to the frequency distributions of men’s answers revealed no significant differences based on participants’ gender.

## General Discussion

Until recently we had little information about how parents deal with issues of cursing in the home. Our narratives and questionnaires offer a wealth of data regarding parental rules and practices, children’s problems conforming to their parents’ standards, and parents’ reactions to infractions. Having to conform to parental rules about cursing and being punished for breaking those rules is a common childhood experience. We suggest that punitive reactions to cursing endow curse words with emotional qualities that contribute to their memorability in autobiographical narratives and laboratory research (see also MacKay & Ahmetzanov, 2005). Our participants were punished for cursing in a variety of contexts, and those episodes were remembered vividly by both men and women.

In the narrative study we report data that conflict with previous research on gender differences. We fail to support the gender research reviewed above that indicated that women’s narratives are more emotional than men’s narratives. Our data show that men and women are equally emotive when they construct narratives of punishment during childhood for cursing. We fail to find differences in the number of curse words men and women use in their narratives. Previous research on gender differences in cursing in the USA (Jay, 1992, 2000) had demonstrated that men use curse words more frequently than women do. The cursing narrative task we used might have suggested to men that they are free to emote about their cursing and to women that they are free to curse.

Both questionnaire and narrative data support previous research that indicates that mothers play a more active role than fathers do in disciplining children for cursing. This is especially true for the technique of soaping children’s mouths as a punishment for cursing. Although no fathers were remembered as soaping in study 1, study 2 showed evidence of fathers soaping, but not as frequently as mothers. The most popular response to children’s cursing was a verbal reprimand. This is different than what is traditionally assumed about physical punishments for cursing. One wonders if these trends hold true for adolescents from different socioeconomic backgrounds where both physical punishment and cursing are more common (see Mosby et al., 1999).

Most of our participants reported that they had learned to curse from other people, not from television or movies, and that they continue to curse frequently as adults. These findings run counter to the notion that children model cursing from popular media. Children acquire language habits such as cursing and name calling by actively participating in these cultural practices. Attempts to attribute offensive language habits to popular media are

misplaced, and they avoid a deeper understanding of what social forces (e.g., peer acceptance) reinforce cursing in the real world. Our results suggest that children continue to curse into adulthood because cursing is an entrenched habit used to cope with stress or because cursing produces interpersonal rewards such as “fitting in.”

As for the long term consequences of being punished for cursing, the ultimate effect of punishment appears to be negligible. People remember having soap put in their mouths, but this does not prevent them from cursing. Because punitive responses by and large have little effect on later cursing, we suggest that a more effective parental response would be an effort to understand why children use curse words in the first place. Cursing can be a symptom of an underlying problem (e.g., anger or frustration) or can be a problem in itself. Parents should focus on the antecedents of cursing: stressful life events. When children have emotional reactions, we suggest that parents expend more effort on helping children to cope with situations that involve anger and frustration, the major sources of cursing (Jay, 1992, 1998). Adults can teach children to understand the nature of anger or frustration and to use alternative behaviors to cursing such as counting to ten, taking a walk, informing others how they feel (e.g., “I’m angry.”), or describing what is wrong (e.g., “I don’t like it when you make fun of me.”). Otherwise, adults end up teaching children that cursing is an excellent way to upset other people. In the end we are skeptical about whether parents can redirect centuries of ineffective practices to control children’s cursing. Our participants, regardless of their inclinations to curse, and despite having been punished for cursing, believe that children should be punished for cursing. Our college-educated participants anticipate reprimanding their own children in the future.

To obtain a more complete picture of childhood cursing we need to collect data on parents’ perceptions of the practices studied here. We are, after all, dealing with college students’ recall of childhood behaviors. It is also important to interview younger children to get fresher and perhaps more accurate reports. More information about the parenting practices of adults with young children is also important to verify childhood accounts.

Cursing is such an interesting subject because it is so infrequently discussed. The taboo nature of offensive language has led to a paucity of research on the topic; indeed, there is a dismissive idea within human communication and language disciplines that taboo words have no status as words (Pinker, 1994). This is the paradox of any taboo subject; it is, by nature, culturally-defined and dependent, yet standards dictate that it is inappropriate to address. Taboo language has strong cultural, religious,

political, and psychological significance, but even researchers fail to give taboo language a frank and thorough analysis. Given the dismissive attitude of the scientific community, it is no wonder that ineffective parental responses to cursing persist. Cursing is punished because people think it’s the right thing to do—a normative behavior. When parents punish cursing instead of addressing the circumstances that led to the situation that inspired cursing, they are effectively reinforcing children’s cursing. There are two reasons for this. First, an extreme reaction from a caregiver confirms that the word is not socially acceptable; it alerts the child to the strong emotional meaning of the taboo word. Second the cause of the cursing is not addressed at all. If the child cursed as a result of being under stress, the focus should be on reducing stress. Here we can say that the tabooess of the topic has perpetuated the tabooess of the words, as philosophers such as Foucault (1977) have predicted.

## Appendix I

### Narrative Score Sheet

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Participant Age \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gender M F  
 House Rules (e.g., religion, TV, movies)  
 Mother curses (how much?)  
 Responses (e.g., physical, yell, reprimand, lose privileges)  
 Father curses (how much?)  
 Responses  
 Other Adults: Grandparent – Neighbor curses  
 Responses  
 Sister curses  
 Parents’ reaction  
 Brother curses  
 Parents’ reaction  
 INCIDENT AGE at incident \_\_\_\_\_  
 Words used – How did adult find out? (e.g., hearsay/tattle)  
 Location of incident  
 Target of incident (or none)  
 Participant’s motivation or justification (e.g., hit with snowball)  
 Felt emotion  
 Authority Figure Present  
 Reaction  
 Expressed emotion  
 Format: Written or Oral  
 Curse words used (list all, or “A-word,” if would not say “asshole”)  
 Total # words \_\_\_\_\_ # of emotion words \_\_\_\_\_ (list)  
 Did Participant ask permission to use curse word yes/no  
 Felt emotion – (e.g., sorry, pissed, anger, etc.)  
 Justification (e.g., TV, movies, culture)  
 Laugh during narrative yes/no  
 Other Comments

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## Appendix II

## Questionnaire

Personal: Age, Gender, Number of brothers, Number of Sisters, Adult(s) who raised you?

1. Did your parents have rules about cursing? Yes No
2. How often were you allowed to curse without any form of punishment?  
Rating Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
3. How often did your parents use religious reasons to explain cursing rules?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
4. How often were you allowed to view television that contained cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
5. How often were you allowed to view movies that contained cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
6. How often were you allowed to listen to music that contained cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
7. How often were you allowed to curse in the presence of adults?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
8. How often were you allowed to curse at other children?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
9. How often were you allowed to curse at your parents?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
10. How often did you hear your mother curse?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
11. How often did your mother respond to your cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
12. How often did your mother verbally reprimand you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
13. How often did your mother take away privileges for your cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
14. How often did your mother physically punish you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
15. How often did your mother spank you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
16. How often did your mother wash your mouth with soap for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
17. How often did you hear your father curse?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
18. How often did your father respond to your cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
19. How often did your father verbally reprimand you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
20. How often did your father take away privileges for your cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
21. How often did your father physically punish you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
22. How often did your father spank you for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
23. How often did your father wash your mouth with soap for cursing?  
Never Sometimes A Lot All the Time
24. Which parent usually punished you for cursing? Mother Father
25. Which parent punished you most severely for cursing? Mother Father
26. Which parent was most likely to ignore your cursing? Mother Father
27. Did another adult punish you at home for cursing? Yes No
28. Who was this person? Grandmother Grandfather Aunt Uncle Neighbor Other
29. Did you have a sister who cursed when you were a child? Yes No
30. Was your sister who cursed older than you were? Yes No
31. Which parent punished your sister most severely for cursing? Mother Father

32. Did you have a brother who cursed when you were a child?				Yes	No		
33. Was your brother who cursed older than you were?				Yes	No		
34. Which parent punished your brother most severely for cursing?				Mother	Father		
35. How often did your mother punish your sister for cursing?	Never	Sometimes	A Lot	All the Time			
36. How often did your father punish your sister for cursing?	Never	Sometimes	A Lot	All the Time			
37. How often did your mother punish your brother for cursing?	Never	Sometimes	A Lot	All the Time			
38. How often did your father punish your brother for cursing?	Never	Sometimes	A Lot	All the Time			
39. Can you remember an experience in your childhood when an adult heard your cursing or was told about your cursing?	Yes	No	Not Sure				
40. How old were you at the time of the incident?							
41. Who was present when you cursed?			Mother	Father	Both	Neither	
42. Who was the adult that was aware of your cursing?			Mother	Father	Grandparent	Neighbor	Other
43. Did the adult hear you curse or did someone tattlet?			Heard	Tattled			
44. If someone tattled, who was it?		Brother	Sister	Friend	Neighbor	Other	
45. Where were you when you cursed?		School	Playground	Neighborhood	Home		
46. Who or what was the target of your cursing?			Person	Situation			
47. Who was the target?		Mother	Father	Sister	Brother	Friend	Other
48. Why did you curse?							
49. Which curse words did you use?							
50. How did you feel after cursing?		Angry/ Frustrated	Happy	Relieved	Embarrassed	Other	
51. Who was the authority figure from this cursing episode?	Mother	Father	Grandparent	Neighbor	Teacher	Other	
52. Did the authority figure react to your cursing?				Yes	No		
53. Were you punished for this cursing episode?				Yes	No		
54. How were you punished for this cursing episode?		Verbal reprimand	Soap in the mouth	Loss of privileges	Physical punishment	Spanking	Other
55. How did the person who punished you react after punishing you?		Angry/ Frustrated	Happy	Relieved	Embarrassed	Other	
56. How did you feel after being punished?		Angry/ Frustrated	Happy	Relieved	Embarrassed	Other	
57. How would you describe your cursing after this episode?				Decreased	Increased	Stayed the same	Movies
58. Why do you think people curse so much? Which of the following do you believe is the greatest influence on cursing?			Habit Learned from parents	To fit in Television	Learned from siblings		
59. How often do you curse?	Never	Sometimes	A Lot	All the Time			
60. Do you think that children should be disciplined for cursing?				Yes	No		
61. How do you think children should be disciplined for cursing?	Verbal reprimand	Loss of privileges	Soap in the mouth	Spanking	Ground to room	Physical punishment	Other
62. How will you react to your own children's cursing?	Verbal reprimand	Loss of privileges	Soap in the mouth	Spanking	Ground to room	Physical punishment	Other
63. What is your attitude about cursing?			It's bad	It's OK	Good for you	Other	
64. In our culture, do you think there is:		Little if any cursing	Not much cursing	A bit too much cursing	Way too much cursing		

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