

Slurs and Biased Language

Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events



Topic Summary

Every day—from the schoolyard to the workplace—we hear biased, hurtful and offensive language, including slurs, epithets (defined below) and so-called “jokes.” We also see slurs written on walls, buildings, streets and in our social media feeds. Many people, especially those who have children in their lives, wonder what to do when they see and hear this kind of language. Parents, caregivers and educators feel they need

to be even more attentive to this language because they know children are listening, absorbing and often-times repeating these slurs.

A few years ago, a story made [national headlines](#) when a Florida State Senator resigned his office because he was using racist and sexist slurs in the presence of two other lawmakers; he specifically used the n-word and derogatory language about women. In his resignation letter, Senator Frank Artiles wrote: “My actions and my presence in government is now a distraction to my colleagues, the legislative process, and the citizens of our great State. I am responsible and I am accountable and effective immediately, I am resigning from the Florida State Senate.”

When people use racist “jokes,” slurs or stereotypes and hear no response, the impact is profound. It tacitly condones the words. It harms the people directly targeted and those who identify in that same way and it sends a message to others that they could be targeted next. It contributes to internalized oppression of those who are on the receiving end. And it leads to an increasing escalation of hate, bias and injustice in society. The [Pyramid of Hate](#) shows us that when people or institutions treat lower-level biased attitudes and language as acceptable with silence or non-action, the bias keeps moving up the pyramid to acts of discrimination and possibly violence.

First and foremost, we need to make sure we are not using biased language ourselves—not in casual conversation, not as a “joke” and not among friends. The adults in children’s lives are 24/7 role models, and if young people hear adults using biased language, it becomes normalized such that children will think it’s okay. It is also important that when we hear biased language, we hold each other accountable.

We need to interrupt it when friends, acquaintances, children, parents/family members, peers, co-workers, neighbors and elected officials either make the comments themselves or remain silent, make excuses or defend biased and stereotypical language.

As we nurture and educate the next generation of children, it is important that that they know, through our words and actions, that slurs and other biased language are unacceptable. We need to actively confront that language when we hear it, refrain from using it ourselves and challenge biased language and encourage all around us—including young people—to do the same.

Here are some ADL resources that provide strategies for challenging slurs and biased language and educating people about the impact of their words.

- [Challenging Biased Language](#)
- [Responding to Bigoted Words](#)
- [Responding to Jokes and Slurs](#)

Slur: an insulting, offensive or degrading remark, often based on an identity group such as race, ethnicity, religion, ethnic, gender/gender identity or sexual orientation.

Epithet: an offensive word or name that is used as a way of abusing or insulting someone.

Age

10 and up

Questions to Start the Conversation

- Do you know what a slur is? Who is usually targeted by slurs?
- What do you think about the State Senator resigning because he used slurs?
- How do you feel when you hear a slur or other biased language?
- Do you hear and see slurs and other biased language as you go about your day? What happens in school when slurs are used?
- How do you and others respond when you hear slurs? How do you wish you could respond?
- Why do you think people use slurs?

Questions to Dig Deeper

(See the Additional Resources section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- What do you think about the impact of slurs—on the people targeted, others who are part of that identity group and the community/society?
- How do you think someone should be held accountable for their words? What about a peer at school? What about a political leader?
- How has your thinking changed by learning more about slurs?

Take Action

Ask: What can we do to help? What individual and group actions can help make a difference?

- As a family, discuss the use of slurs that you have seen, heard or used yourselves and talk about what you are going to do to confront slurs and biased language (either in person or online) in yourselves and others in the future.
- Help to organize an educational forum in school to talk about slurs and the bias that underlies the biased language; explore and strategize what can be done about it in school or community to prevent it from being used or addressing it when it is. Start a public awareness campaign in school and online.
- Write a letter to your school or community newspaper about your thoughts and feelings about slurs and other biased language and what you think should be done about it.

Additional Resources

- [Slurs, Offensive Jokes and How to Respond](#) (ADL Lesson Plan)
- [The Power of Real Apologies in a Fake Apology World](#)
- [Challenging Biased Language](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [Words Matter: Standing Up to Bigoted Language](#)