

When it comes to swearing, it's OK to be old-fashioned

LES WALTON, who was once told to "**** off" by a toddler during assembly, picks through a minefield of industrial language

It is a constant theme in these articles about how schools prepare young people for the "outside world" while at the same time attempt to maintain patterns of behaviour which may be at odds with those of their families and friends.

In 1951 I had the good fortune of watching Newcastle United play Blackpool in the FA Cup on my uncle's television. The Bush Bakelite TV had a 12-inch screen. In order to make the picture bigger a magnifying pane of glass was strapped to the front. As the first half progressed, with no goals, the language in the room got slightly "rich".

At half-time, because of the bad language emitting from my dad and uncle, my mother gave me the red card and banned ME from going back in for the second half. I missed Jackie Milburn scoring the two winning goals, starting a tradition of Newcastle fans never seeing Newcastle winning the FA Cup. That taught me a lot. Swearing at football matches is bad. Adults, even my mam, can be unfair.

When I was little there was a very clear demarcation between children's TV and adult TV.

During the 1950s, for most of my childhood, children's television began with just one programme a week on the BBC. The first "For the Children", featuring The Hogarth Puppet Circus, went out on Sunday June 9, 1946 from 3.35 to 4pm. Within two years a weekly hour of programmes was gathered under the same title.

By 1954 there was a daily hour or so of programmes; a 15-minute Watch with Mother film at 4pm, a close down, then up to 60 minutes more from 5pm. In the late '40s and early '50s the people making these programmes thought it dangerous to have children watching too much television!

Radio was still dominant; my favourite being Archie Andrews. Archie, a ventriloquist's dummy used by ventriloquist Peter Brough, starred in Educating Archie on radio. Peter Brough was such a bad ventriloquist many of us reckoned we could see his lips move even on the radio.

My other favourite radio programme in 1953 was Journey into Space, a BBC Radio science fiction programme, written by BBC producer Charles Chilton. In the UK it was the last radio programme to attract



➤ Archie Andrews with Peter Brough in 1958. "Many of us reckoned we could see his lips move even on the radio."

a bigger evening audience than TV.

However, there were TV programmes which we were not allowed to watch - popular American programmes such as I Love Lucy and Dragnet. Today these programmes would not even require a parental guidance certificate.

As a head teacher I was always very strict on bad language. My usual comment was - you wouldn't swear in a church or at your grandma's funeral, so you do know how to control your language.

Occasionally this position is hard to defend. Many years later the local primary head teacher, who later was made a dame for her services to education, invited me to give an assembly in her school. As I was talking to the children, a former student came in the back with her two-year-old child. Just as I had achieved "total silence" a little voice piped up "**** off". After the toddler had repeated the phrase half a dozen times the mother was asked to take the toddler outside.

The management of "bad language" is not easy. Quite often bad language to one person is just part of the normal everyday conversation to another.

Many years later I was sitting in my usual seat at Newcastle United when the man next to me started swearing. I asked him to tone it down as my children were sitting next to me. He stopped. Then his wife leaned across and said, "I'm sorry. The little ***** does it all the time".

So what do we do in schools when children can hear "bad language" on

the TV every night? The very clear divisions between what children watch on TV have now gone. For people swearing is "normal".

This is why being a head teacher is not simple. Most people accept that we should not have behaviour in our schools which simply reflects the behaviour seen on the outside.

Perhaps schools will always be accused of being just behind ever-changing cultural norms. When I started teaching we would always address fellow teachers with Mr or Mrs. Now we call each other by first names. Children would always call you either Sir or Miss.

Even in the 1990s, (you may consider me old fashioned), I always insisted we use the terms children or pupils instead of kids. I still hate teachers saying "you guys" when addressing the classroom.

When I talk to parents as a group there is an absolute agreement that schools should make a stand on bad language, even though the parents and children may be happily "cussin' and blinding" in front of the telly at home.

So what is the answer? Perhaps the answer is that schools should defend the values and behaviours that we all aspire to, or certainly that we remember from our own childhood. Even though we might be labelled as out of touch and old fashioned.

So when I tell off people at football matches for booing, swearing and spitting..... forgive me, I'm just behind the fashion.

■ Les Walton is chairman of the Northern Education Trust