

“Maybe I Don’t Need to Teach Grammar Formally”

So you think you can dance—oops, I mean, so you think you can avoid teaching grammar?

The truth is that you, perhaps, can avoid it (though I recommend formal training for understanding both the terminology and how our language works). The answer to that all-important question depends not on your child, but on *you*.

Do you and your spouse speak English well? Is your grammar usage correct? Are you sure? Later, I shall offer you four easy ways to help your children improve their own language ability, but for now I want you to ponder these questions.

Most people immediately respond affirmatively to these question. Some, in fact, are emphatic about their linguistic ability. However, there exists a major problem—one with which most people are unaware. If *you* speak incorrectly, unless someone literally brings it to your attention, you cannot be sure. Fundamentally, usage reflects the way we all learn our language! You learned it from your parents. Your children’s “first” language absolutely imitates yours. Add to that the conundrum that it **sounds right**, even if it’s **wrong**. This creates a big problem.

Let me share a brief anecdote that will validate my perspective. When I developed *Easy Grammar* series, I taught the prepositional approach and moved to verbs, ascertaining that students mastered the correct past and past participle forms of irregular verbs. One day, a seventh grade student raised her hand and asked, “Are we allowed to correct our parents?” I explained my reluctance—that this may be considered disrespectful. The ensuing day, three sets of parents arrived at my classroom door. Apparently, the students had shared my remark about not correcting them. These particular parents asked me to consider changing my stance, suggesting that students discuss with their parents if correcting them were an option. I concurred. Then, one parent made an honest remark that touched my heart and validated my grammar belief: **“We had no idea the words we were using were incorrect!”** (Wrong usage sounds right to the speaker, but, unfortunately, it sounds wrong to those who use correct grammar.)

Now, do you understand why I ask home-educators to teach grammar formally? Are you actually implying, Dr. Phillips, that I might be speaking incorrectly, and I don’t even know it? Yes! **Remember**; the language you speak in your home is *exactly* what your children have learned. Whether the verbiage is correct or incorrect, it **sounds right** to *you* and your family. (If I’m within your midst, relax; I do not correct adults. I consider that to be rude or arrogant—actually, a combination of both.)

At this point, you have options. You may ignore my advice, or you may choose to ascertain that your children learn correct grammar, a *tool for speaking and writing properly*. I hope that you choose the latter. We all want our children to achieve their full potential in order to serve the Lord well.

As promised earlier, allow me to share four ways parents can improve their children's grammar and writing.

1. Speak to your children in complete sentences. Children learn your syntax (sentence structures), and these flow into their speaking and writing. You will see fewer sentence fragments in their paragraphs and essays.
2. Use higher-level vocabulary with your children. I assure you that you will soon hear them using this new vocabulary. You can, in fact, teach vocabulary in many ways. Playing word games is a terrific introduction to new words.

You may teach vocabulary formally, through vocabulary from their reading selections. (As a teacher, I read each selection, seeking new vocabulary words. We discussed each one, and my students were quizzed on them. [Some educators frown on this method, but I found it highly beneficial.])

You may introduce vocabulary informally. When my children were little, I disliked the terms, *puke* and *vomit*. Instead, I used *regurgitate*. That was the word they used until their teenage years when they discovered "puke" was a popular word with their peers.

3. Speak using higher-level sentence structures. Your children, most definitely, reflect your syntax. If you, for example, use adverbial and relative clauses, your children will begin to incorporate them in their own speech and written language.
4. Encourage your children to read stories and other literature. The more they read, the better readers they become. In addition, the higher the reading-material level, the more complex the vocabulary and sentence structures. Children assimilate these and, usually, automatically incorporate them into their own speaking and writing.

Dr. Wanda Phillips is author of *Easy Grammar* series, *Daily GRAMS* series, *Easy Writing*, and *Easy Grammar Ultimate Series* (Grades 8-12⁺). Her book(let), *Easy Grammar's Guide for Parents: Improve Your Grammar in Minutes* contains two short assessments that help adults determine if they are making any major errors. Dr. Phillips is also available to present seminars.