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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Learning to Say "I'm Sorry"**

Learning to apologize well is important and difficult. We believe that understanding both the "big picture" and a child's point of view about apologies enables parents to assist their child most effectively.

**The big picture:** The big picture focuses on the ultimate goal of teaching children to apologize well, something that requires social and emotional skills. Social skill is necessary because apologies involve making offerings to another person and because appropriate apologies accord with certain social and cultural conventions. Emotional skill is necessary because apologies should be "genuine." The person apologizing must mean what he or she says, which involves feelings of contrition and a resolution to "not do it again." Children cannot be expected to both socially "do" and emotionally "feel" apologies until adults have guided them through apologies – step by step – over many years.

**The child's point of view:** The most effective long-term strategy to help children develop any good behavior over the long term is to recognize and support their own wishes to do the right thing. By the age of 2, most children have strong wishes to do the right thing; by this time they have formed a rudimentary conscience and feel guilt and shame over their misbehavior.

Most young children frequently misbehave. Their consciences are present, but not strong enough to control and guide their behavior when they feel their powerful emotions and needs. When caught in misbehavior, young children are confronted with more than their young personalities can bear. The combination of their parent's disapproval, real or imagined punishments, and their own disapproval and loss of self-esteem can be overwhelming. Under such circumstances, young children generally act "defensively." They

try to convince themselves and parents that they are innocent, justified, or don't really care about their action or its consequences. They might deny facts, attempt to shift responsibility, repeat the misdeed as a way of showing that it did not matter, or attack their parents verbally or physically.

**How to help:** We encourage parental efforts to teach their child the importance of making amends when their misbehavior affects another person. However, parents have to be careful not to ask for more acknowledgment of responsibility than a child can tolerate at their particular age. It is important that children feel, at whatever age, that they are a good apologizer. Parents should think of it like any other learning task, in which the first steps should be celebrated.

The concept of apologies has little or no meaning for a 2-year-old or younger child. Age 3 is a good time to begin helping a child make meaningful apologies. With regard to apologies and the distinction we made earlier, we suggest that parents ask their 3-year-old for only modest social growth while vigorously focusing upon their emotional growth. Parents should approach apologies as an opportunity for their child to do something good rather than just to do penance, and thereby maintain an encouraging rather than an admonishing attitude. As an illustration, parents can provide a growth-promoting apology for their 3-year-old by simply saying: "I know that you, just like Mommy, are unhappy that you threw your food. You can apologize by trying not to do it again." This approach would emphasize and support the child's remorse, help preserve his or her pride, and avoid a control battle. Non-verbal apologies, such as getting an icepack for a child they may have hit or drawing a picture for a child whose feeling they have hurt, can be tolerable and meaningful ways that some children can express their regrets. Parents might also find it helpful to delay for a few hours their discussion of a misdeed and suggested reparations so that their child can gain some distance from his or her emotions.

We should expect a little more from the older preschooler. Some 3-year-olds, and certainly most 4- and 5-year-olds, should be able to offer a somewhat more advanced social apology. However, their ability to apologize will fluctuate based on the emotions they have to manage and the emotional resources that they can call upon at the moment. Here is an illustration:

*4-year-old Tommy knocked down his sister's tower. Their father asked*

*Tommy to, "Tell your sister that you are sorry." Tommy told his father that he was not sorry; his sister had called him a "stupid head." The father said, "I know that you don't feel sorry right now, and I am not asking you to feel sorry. I am asking you to say you are sorry, because that is what we do when we knock down someone's tower."*

By clarifying the difference between apologies as a social act and as an emotional feeling, Tommy's father supported Tommy's right to have his own feelings and his growing ability to make apologies.

Older preschoolers can be asked to suggest their own ideas about how to apologize. Parents should be prepared to accept even a "scrap." A small gesture may feel like a success to a child and build his or her confidence as an "apologizer." Perhaps parents can allow a child to yell, "I am sorry!" from another room, or even offer a smile. This story illustrates this sort of parental flexibility:

*Four-year-old Jackie would not apologize to her father after she threw and broke his favorite cup. She ran around the house, chanting, "stupid cup, stupid cup." Her mother recognized that Jackie was devastated and, within Jackie's earshot, told Daddy that she thought that Jackie really wished that the cup had not been broken.*

Jackie's mother expressed feelings that Jackie could not voice when she offered the apology upon Jackie's behalf. She modeled an apology that Jackie will grow to emulate. Modeling is the very best kind of teaching, and parents can find many ways to provide this instruction. Parents can apologize to their daughter when appropriate, perhaps when a parent loses their temper, doesn't keep a promise or sets a consequence that seems excessive. Parents can model apologies in their relationship with each other –children will be watching closely. Building the capacity to make apologies takes time and tact, and if parents allow this capacity to emerge in its own time, it will have true stability and authenticity.