

The Power of Saying “I’m Sorry”

“It’s not whether you make a mistake, it’s how you handle it that counts.” ~ *Old adage*

MY THREE-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON gives heartfelt apologies to his stuffed animals if, in the midst of dramatic play, he knocks one over or steps on its head. He is following in the very considerate footsteps of his parents, who apologize to him when they unintentionally make him feel bad.

Though parents in the past may have feared that saying “I’m sorry” was a sign of weakness, psychologists today say it’s a sign of strength for parents to apologize. Admitting we are wrong takes courage, and if we want our children to be brave and accountable for their mistakes, we have to demonstrate how that’s done. “I’m sorry I yelled. I wasn’t having much self-control.”

Being able to apologize, rather than cover up our errors, teaches children many things: It’s all right to be human, it’s important to be honest when we are wrong, and when we make someone else feel bad, it’s our job to try to repair the connection.

Apologies don’t guarantee instant results. Author Jacqueline Mitchard reported that her five-year-old son Atticus said he “had” to hit his brother Will because Will wouldn’t accept his apology.

In spite of misunderstandings, research shows that reaching out to make amends actually makes the offended person feel more empathic. Apologies also reduce the upset person’s level of stress and calm him physically. We are much more likely to feel forgiving and understanding toward some-one who offended us if the transgressor seems sorry and admits his mistakes. Apologies teach us about relationships at every age.

Here are some ideas for teaching our children about reaching out to others when they’ve caused an upset.

Applaud children for wanting to make up. “I see that you feel bad for knocking down your brother’s tower. Why don’t you help him build it back up? That shows how caring you are.”

Avoid forcing children to apologize. We can ask children if they want to say “sorry,” but insincere apologies don’t reestablish connections with the other person. A child may not want to say the word “sorry,” but she could offer the other person an ice pack or sit next to her.

Talk about your resistance to apologizing. We can share our feelings that it can be hard to apologize. Saying “I’m sorry” is humbling, and we don’t know how the other person will respond. Acknowledging the difficulty of trying to make amends can help a child see that trying to reconnect takes bravery, something that can make them feel good, even if the other person doesn’t feel forgiving in the moment.

Make the reparation more important than the mistake. Congratulate children on noticing hurt feelings. It isn’t always clear who is at fault, but learning the value of making amends makes a pivotal difference in a person’s life.

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