

Three Step Apology

As parents, “Say sorry!” is often pouring out of our mouths before we have even fully processed the offense committed. While the intention behind this is to foster the emotional development of our children, more often than not, it either escalates into a fight about saying those actual words, or ends with a half-hearted, generic apology. As a therapist and clinician, it’s one of my greatest pleasures to provide parents with the skills to *really* foster the emotional development of our children. And, as is so many other parenting lessons, the first step in building a healthy relationship is basing it on mutual respect and setting an example. To do this, we need to learn to apologize effectively and meaningfully. And I can teach you one way.

I was having one of those days - just exhausted, tired, and nothing seemed easy. You know the kind? I was running on a low amount of emotional energy. So, when my twin girls, who were 7 years old, found themselves in a fight - about who knows what! - I didn’t have the emotional reserves to deal with it. And for whatever reason, I invited them to come and fight in front of me. At some point after listening to them fight and as my emotional exhaustion hit a new low, I got so angry about the whole situation that I went to slam my hand down, intending to hit the counter. Instead, my hand landed on the faucet. The faucet broke and water went everywhere. Picture it - an exhausted mother, terrified twins, a broken faucet, and water spraying everywhere. The girls ran upstairs, frightened. When they came downstairs, with apology notes and their piggy banks, I stopped them. What had happened with the sink was not their problem - it was mine. I said that it was *my* anger and *my* behavior. At that moment, their fight was not what we needed to discuss. My behavior was. I told them that I needed to apologize to them. I said that I was sorry I yelled and I acknowledged that it probably really scared them and made them think I was really angry. I also ventured a guess that feeling that anger might have even made them feel like I didn’t love them anymore. I ended by telling them that next time, I could step away, take a breath, or even not engage with their fighting in the first place while running so low on emotional capital.

This arch of an apology is what I call “The Three-Step Apology.”

Step 1: State, very specifically, what you did.

“I yelled and slammed my fist on the faucet, which broke.”

Step 2: State how it affected you, and everyone who was involved.

“I bet my yelling and behavior was really scary for you. I am worried it could have felt like I didn’t love you any more. I also realize you might feel guilty for my emotions and behavior.”

Step 3: Make amends: State clearly how you, exclusively, will prevent or improve this type of situation going forward.

“I’m sorry I scared you and acted so angry. Next time, if I am running low on emotional energy, I will take a break from the situation and step back and take a deep breath, or I will not engage in the situation at all.”

Let’s look at another example, maybe one where the fault isn’t entirely on the parent. Let’s say that your family has an established rule where nobody gets to take food into the basement. Yet, when you get home from work, you find your teenager in the basement just snacking away with his friend. You say, “Excuse me! You know there is no food allowed downstairs.” He retorts with, “Leave me alone! You ruin everything.” (Perhaps even a few choice curse words.) Not only has he broken the family’s rule, but now you think he has “disrespected you”. Following very understandable logic, you could demand an apology, which will likely not lead to anyone feeling good. Instead, I would recommend that you take a step back and consider the three-step apology.

To do this, start by trying to understand the experience of your child. He might have gotten embarrassed by being yelled at in front of a friend.

Step 1: State what you did

“My timing for discussing this with you was poor. I spoke to you about this while you and your friend were having a good time.”

Step 2: State how it affected those involved

“I probably made you feel embarrassed by speaking to you that way, especially because it was in front of your friend. You may even feel embarrassed of your reaction to me since it was in front of them as well.”

Step 3: Make amends

“I will improve my timing for these types of conversations. I could have asked you to come upstairs to talk, or I could have just waited until we were alone next. I am sorry. I could have been more respectful to you.”

At this point you will either get an apology in return, or you won’t. But at minimum, you will feel regulated in your own emotions. You can feel confident that you have modeled a behavior that your child can learn by example. In my experience as a clinician and a mother, this is a much more effective method of teaching your children how to take responsibility for their actions than demanding an apology ever could be. When the parent apologizes to their child, the pressure is relieved, and a safe space is created for honesty and vulnerability. It is in this space that children can learn to regulate their own emotions. The ultimate ripple effect of modeling this behavior is that you end up with a child who grows into an adult that takes responsibility for their actions.

Take “Say sorry!” out of the rotation, and practice apologizing to your kids instead. There is no doubt that the latter can be more challenging. But it is far more rewarding and effective. You will feel more in control of yourself, and you will model for your child how to take responsibility for their actions and emotions.