

# Learning How to Say You're Sorry



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Apologies are a sticky wicket for many of us. We often disown responsibility when other people's feelings are hurt. But how come? Our social survival in many ways depends on our knowledge of how and when to apologize.

A few months back, I read *On Apology* by Aaron Lazare (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). This book examines the history of apologies and their fate in our time. Lazare analyzes examples by nations and famous people. He also talks about how apologies work and what they need to succeed. He says they help heal wounds and repair damage in seven ways:

- They restore self-respect and dignity
- They reassure everyone that certain values are shared
- They affirm that the offense at issue was not the victim's fault
- They promise the victim safety in future transactions
- They provide a chance to see the offender suffer
- They compensate for the harm caused by the offense
- They make possible a meaningful dialogue with the offender

As you might guess, some apologies never happen because there is no preliminary agreement on who did what.

One reason may be that everyone sees things differently, and none of us wants to regard someone else's point of view as more valid than our own. Another reason may be that we are afraid of looking foolish and want to avoid feeling guilt and shame. Then, too, we are often uncomfortable owning a mistake that might mean we owe someone something.

Sometimes the opportunity to apologize and make amends assumes great significance because it allows offenders to be rehabilitated so that they can reenter society as productive members.

Since everyone makes mistakes, we all need to be able to accept them, learn from them, and move forward in our relationships with each other. Precisely for this reason, it's essential that we teach our children from an early age how to say they are sorry.

A good apology must be heartfelt and sincere, must express the intention not to repeat the offense in the future, and must offer to repair the damage done. Sometimes an explanation is also needed. We need to teach youngsters the importance of including these parts.

We must show children in every case how their actions affect others. A youngster may dismiss shoplifting in Sports Authority, for example, as hurting no one, since corporations and department stores tend to be huge, impersonal presences. But if we bring the child face to face with a manager or other stakeholder, we can personalize the offense.

Once the child sees that her action has harmed someone, she needs to do more than just mumble an "I'm sorry" that is quickly forgotten. In each case the victim must decide how sincere the offender seems. We are all familiar with unsatisfactory, slippery phrases like "I apologize for whatever I did" or "I'm sorry if you took offense at what I said." *The offender must say she's sorry and mean it.*

*Children also need to promise not to make the same mistake again, so that their apologies reaffirm the values we all share. "When those who have offended us refuse to acknowledge their behaviors as unacceptable," Lazare writes, "we may feel we can no longer count on the trustworthiness, predictability, and support that we always took for granted."*

Last and most important, the offender must compensate the victim for harm suffered. *A good apology must include a question such as "How can I make it up to you?"* When offenders make good in ways satisfactory to the victim, a power shift occurs. The victim, with renewed self-respect and dignity, can decide afterward whether or not to forgive.

As adults showing our children the way, we should welcome the chance to apologize to children when it is appropriate to do so. Children who know how to say they're sorry will be well equipped to repair personal relationships throughout their lifetimes. They will know how to accept mistakes—their own and those of others—and they will understand the importance of forgiveness.