



EMPATHY

Don't Ask Them to Say "Sorry"

If you've ever tried to make a preschooler say "Sorry," you've probably seen them mumble it into their chest or say it cheerfully, as if they just won a prize. That's because young children don't grasp what an apology means. They're still figuring out their emotions and have limited awareness of how their actions affect others.

As an adult, you naturally associate "sorry" with remorse, but for a preschooler, it can easily become just a magic word to get them out of a spot. Saying the word "sorry" doesn't mean they understand it—and if you focus on making them say it, you miss the chance to help them mean it.

There Is Always a Reason:

When your child mumbles a half-hearted "sorry" or says it

cheerfully like they just answered a quiz question correctly, they're not being defiant or insincere. To young children, "sorry" often becomes just another word that adults want them to say when something goes wrong, similar to "please" or "thank you." They learn that saying this magic word makes the uncomfortable situation go away and gets adults to stop being upset with them, but they don't grasp the deeper emotional concepts of remorse, responsibility, or genuine concern for someone else's feelings.

The challenge with apologies is that preschoolers are still learning how to connect what they do with what happens next, especially when it comes to emotions and social situations. When they push another child and that child starts crying, they might not automatically connect their action to the other child's distress. Their brain is still figuring out how to connect the dots: "I pushed them, they got hurt, they feel sad, and I should feel bad for what I did." This kind of thinking takes years to learn.

Empathy—the ability to understand and share someone else's feelings—is also still under construction in young children. While they might notice that someone is sad or hurt, they don't yet have the emotional understanding to truly put themselves in another person's shoes or feel genuine concern about someone else's pain. This isn't selfishness or lack of caring; it's simply a reflection of their developmental stage. Their own emotions and needs still feel overwhelmingly important and immediate, making it difficult for them to focus on someone else's emotional experience.

When children are forced to apologize before they understand what it means, they often learn to use "sorry" as a get-out-of-trouble word rather than developing genuine empathy or accountability. This can actually interfere with their natural learning to care about others because they learn that saying the

right words is more important than understanding the impact of their actions or feeling motivated to make things better. Instead of building real feelings of understanding, forced apologies can teach children to perform remorse rather than feel it, which doesn't serve them or their relationships well in the long run.

Here's What I've Found Works:

- **Model what you want to see:**

If your child hurts another and causes them to cry, don't force an insincere apology. Instead, apologize to the other child yourself: "I'm sorry that hurt. Let's check if you're okay." Your child will learn by watching you.

- **Explain the situation simply:**

Take your child aside and say something like, "She's crying because it hurt when you pushed her." This helps them connect actions and emotions.

- **Help them express themselves:**

Instead of forcing an insincere apology, guide them: "Can you ask if they're okay?" or "Would you like to give them a hug or help them feel better?" Actions teach more than words.

- **Acknowledge their emotions too:**

If your child is upset, recognize it: "It looks like you're frustrated. Let's take a deep breath and talk about it." Helping them process their own emotions lays the foundation for recognizing others' feelings later.

- **Focus on making amends (repairing):**

Shift the focus from saying sorry to doing something to help fix the situation or make the other person feel better.

“What could we do to help Sam feel better after his tower fell?” This teaches responsibility and restorative action.

- **Praise empathy:**

Instead of focusing on the word “sorry,” praise behavior that demonstrates empathy in lieu of an apology. “I saw that you helped her get up. That was really kind.”

- **Practice through storytelling or pretend play:**

Use puppets or dolls to act out small conflicts. “Teddy bumped Bunny. What can Teddy do?” This lets your child explore empathy in a low-pressure way.

Common Challenges:

- **Other adults expect it:**

In settings where other adults expect an apology, acknowledge it while sticking to your approach: “We’re working on understanding what “sorry” means right now, so instead of just saying it, we’re going to...”

- **They keep repeating the behavior:**

Real learning needs repetition. Each time, calmly point out the impact of their actions and reinforce empathy. Consistency is key.

- **Your child refuses to engage or make amends:**

Avoid forcing interaction. State the observation simply: “It looks like you’re not ready to help right now.” Continue to model care for the hurt child yourself.

- **The other child doesn’t accept the apology/amends:**

Validate both children. “It’s kind of you to offer a hug. Tilly, it looks like you’re still feeling too sad for a hug right

now, and that's okay." Explain to your own child, "Sometimes people need a little more time to feel better, even after we try to help."

Look on the Bright Side

When feelings are hurt, it's easy to want your child to say "sorry" right away. But at their age, they're not trying to be rude or heartless—they just don't fully understand the meaning of the word yet. What matters most is teaching your child to connect their actions to others' feelings and to show them what an apology looks and feels like—not just how it sounds. This takes time, patience, and repetition. You're building the foundation of empathy, not just social niceties. You're not teaching your child to say sorry; you're teaching them why it matters.

Struggling with apologies is a stage. It's normal.

