

FAMILY MATTERS

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Roberta Rachel Omin, LCSW

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APOLOGIES

HOW DO YOU HANDLE A SITUATION IN WHICH:

- You say something inappropriate to your spouse
- You are off base in how you react to your child - even if provoked
- You receive an insincere apology from a family member
- You expect to receive an apology from a family member

We all, at one time or another, behave inappropriately or in a hurtful manner toward our children or our spouse. We may also be on the receiving end. Generally these actions are not consciously meant to harm the other person. They may be temporary lacks of judgment that are not truly representative of how we, or the other person, feel. Communication between family members can then become emotionally charged. Relationships that hold many negatively charged feelings, with no repair, can become toxic and distant. The good news is this is part of growing and learning. When we feel regret for our misdeeds, we can take what was once wrong and make it right again.



This subject of apology came to mind recently when I was speaking with a mother who told me how her son revealed how he had been hurt by her. The mom lied to her son saying she didn't remember the situation where she had been judgmental and dismissive of her son's school performance. The mother felt stuck; she had remembered what happened and had to grapple with how to apologize for her critical tone without hurting her son further. It was also important that mom own up to the lie she told her son, which was made out of a wish to protect them both.

I appreciated this mother's struggle on several fronts. Her son's hurt and resentment had increased an emotional distance that already existed between them. It was similar to this mother's cool relationship with her own mother. A part of mom wanted to change this generational pattern of distance; another part of her wanted to let things be. A third part felt genuine guilt for hurting her son years ago and wondered what other hurts might be festering.

When parents are able to sincerely apologize for their mistakes, their children are more likely to do so for their mistakes.

WHY BOTHER APOLOGIZING? Family members who apologize to each other create a foundation of trust, safety and being able to clean up wrongdoings. This is necessary for marital partners, parents and children as well as for siblings. A genuine apology not only has great power to undo harm, it can give provide awareness as to how to avoid or deal with future conflicts. When spouses are able to take the necessary risk and apologize to each other for misdeeds, the relationship can move on. When children witness this, they learn about mending discord. When children experience apologies first-hand from their parents, they feel better because their feelings matter.

WHAT DO WE APOLOGIZE FOR? Perhaps we say or do something hurtful in the heat of the moment that we instantly regret or we justify. Perhaps we make a promise we don't keep by letting other commitments get in the way. Maybe we overstep a boundary by criticizing our child in front of his friend when it is better to talk to our child privately. Maybe there is a misunderstanding of intention or sarcastic comment. All of these situations need to be dealt with. On the other hand, we don't have to apologize for setting limits and providing consequences that children need. We also don't have to apologize because our child is unhappy that he isn't getting his way.

WHAT AN APOLOGY DOES FOR YOU, FOR THE OTHER PERSON AND FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIP

For the other person:

- Validates the injured person's experience
- Creates the possibility for forgiveness
- Heals bruised feelings and repairs mistakes made to the injured person

For yourself:

- Demonstrates your willingness to accept responsibility for your actions
- Helps you forgive yourself for wrongful behavior
- Helps you accept your imperfections

For your Relationship:

- Clears the air so anger, resentments and hurts don't brew
- Makes room for positive problem solving so you can move forward
- Brings closeness, love and caring back to your relationships

GETTING OFF THE HOOK

Some parents believe they don't owe apologies to their child because they are the grown-ups. Or they believe that the child's behavior provoked their own misbehavior and thereby justifying their action. While a child may have pushed a parent's hot buttons, the child isn't responsible for *how* the parent reacts. Parents have choices. Even if a child is exasperating a parent, it is the parent's job to find a way to respond in a way that demonstrates good behavior. On those occasions when we do 'screw up', we do owe an apology for our contribution to the problem. The art is to do so without tagging on "you made me do it"

One parental challenge is to alter the belief that our child will lose respect for us if we apologize. To the contrary, respect will be gained when we sincerely apologize and work to not repeat a hurtful behavior pattern.

We all have prideful parts that can get in the way of offering an apology. This happens when we can't admit we made a mistake and blame others instead. Some people take pride in the fact that they don't apologize. It is likely that those whose pride gets in the way excessively, did not experience apologies growing up from their own parents. Pride can also be a way we protect ourselves when we feel ashamed for how we treat someone else. This, in turn, interferes with making a genuine apology. In my experience, supporting parents in accepting their humanness goes a long way. It is important to get help with issues of pride and shame as apologizing difficulties are often passed down through generations.



Empty apologies are another way to get off the hook. "Well I told you I was sorry, isn't that good enough?" We all know that an apology without meaning isn't an apology at all. It breeds further conflict. Parents who become comfortable making a genuine apology with naturally demonstrate it for their child to emulate. Empty apologies also come in the form of saying one is sorry without giving due attention to what caused the harmful behavior or reaction. Understanding what led us to the misdeed is necessary for change to happen and before an apology can be given.

What ensues when apologies don't happen or don't work? Problems persist, real communication halts and emotional distance increases.

WANT TO REMEDY THE SITUATION?



1. Cool down. If you are still too angry or hurt to think clearly, tell your child that you need some time alone before continuing the conversation.
2. Think about what happened and why. Assess your feelings by thinking about how you would describe what happened to an adult friend.
3. Recognize you made a mistake. Accept this responsibility.
4. Apologize simply and directly. Express regret or sadness at the hurt, anger, embarrassment or disappointment you have caused.
5. Apologize for your behavior, not yourself. For example, "I am sorry I lost my temper and called you lazy and worthless." This is more effective than saying, "I'm sorry, I am a thoughtless and impatient mother."
6. Watch out for the 'fake-out' apology. These excuse your behavior by blaming your child. For instance, "If you weren't late, I wouldn't have gotten so angry at you". This "I'm sorry ...but" is accusatory. A better way would be, "I should have dealt with my feelings differently. It wasn't right to get so hotheaded and say hurtful things to you as I did."
7. Save discussion for the underlying problem for another time when you ask yourself and your child what could have been done to avoid the problem. For example,

missing the school bus because of oversleeping. Review, practice or role-play how to handle similar problems in the future.

8. Be sure to ask for forgiveness. "I was wrong, I really let you down by breaking an important promise. Will you please forgive me?" This kind of apology reinforces your feelings of regret while giving your child an understanding of the power of forgiveness. If your child is still angry or hurt and doesn't immediately forgive you, there may be more to talk about or you just may need to give it time. We all digest apologies in our own way and at our own pace.

9. While it is not necessary, nor wise, to air marital laundry in front of your children, it is okay to let them see you apologize when you have over-reacted or acted inappropriately. Be sure you deliver it in a way *they can handle it*. It models healthy cleaning up mistakes.

10. Help siblings work out disagreements and learn to apologize to each other. If they are not be ready at the same time, it is wiser to wait until each is truly ready to talk rather than push for a quick recovery.

11. Deal with one issue at a time. Don't confuse or overwhelm the relationship with past unrelated issues.



WRAPPING IT UP

In making amends, the important things are to learn the lesson of how the erred judgment and behavior occurred, acknowledge your mistake cleanly to the other person and move on. Remind yourself of all the good things you have done as a parent including your well-made and well-meant apology. This may include forgiving your self. When apologies are part of your family's foundation, you are setting a positive and healthy tone with the people you care about most.

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Roberta Rachel Omin, LCSW, has her psychotherapy and counseling practice in Ossining and Rye Brook, NY. She uses a holistic approach with families, couples and individuals. She has authored many articles on parenting and family issues. Roberta has completed Gestalt, EMDR and Internal Family Systems training. With more than twenty-five years of experience, she brings sensitivity and authenticity to help those she works with achieve healthier more satisfying lives.