MAKING AMENDS FOR KIDS

Difficulty: MODERATE | Frequency: VARIABLE | Duration: VARIABLE

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY IT

Apologies alone can work to repair relationships by rebuilding trust. But when kids offer restitution to someone they wronged, they are also taking steps to ease that person's hurt feelings. As children get older, they begin to see coerced apologies (when, for example, a parent tells another child to apologize to them) as inauthentic. As a result, offering reparations is not only kinder but also more likely to be well-received.

Parents can help children understand the power of making amends in fostering forgiveness and stronger social ties. Because conflict will inevitably arise with others, making amends is a valuable relationship skill.

TIME REQUIRED

This practice takes about 10 minutes. It can be done when your children are seeking another person’s forgiveness, and it can also be done before such a situation arises.

HOW TO DO IT

Like adults, children can find themselves in situations where they recognize they’ve hurt or wronged someone either on purpose or by accident. Although you might be tempted to ask your child to say they're sorry, not all apologies are effective. A more helpful approach is to invite your child to think about how to make amends.

Begin a conversation—either about something that happened to your child, or about a story your child is reading or watching where one character harmed another, regardless of their intention. Open by helping them to notice how the victim could be feeling and then asking, “What do you think you (or the character) could do to help right now?”

Encourage them to move beyond a perfunctory and half-hearted “Sorry” to think about possible actions they could take to alleviate the hurt or right the wrong. This could be helping someone rebuild a tower of cards that they knocked over, bringing an ice pack to someone who tripped over their foot, replacing someone’s markers that they let dry out, or asking someone they left out of a game to play with them.

Encourage your children to commit to an act of reparation alongside their apologies.

EVIDENCE IT THAT WORKS

Drell, M. B., & Jaswal, V. K. (2016). Making amends: Children’s expectations about and responses to apologies. *Social Development*, 25, 742–758.

Children who were six and seven years old built towers, which were knocked down by a college student who was playing alongside them. The children received one of four responses: a spontaneous apology, an apology after prompting, no apology, or an offer of restitution. While apologies or restitution led children to share more with the student compared to no apology, an offer of restitution was the only response that actually made kids feel better.

WHY TO TRY IT

Not all apologies are created equal; the most effective ones include reparations in order to alleviate the hurt that we caused. Reparations help communicate remorse, and, as children get older, they are more forgiving of others who show remorse while apologizing. Reparations also help create new positive interactions between the individuals involved and can help them return to a cooperative relationship.

SOURCES

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This practice is part of Greater Good in Action, a clearinghouse of the best research-tested methods for increasing happiness, resilience, kindness, and connection, created by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley and HopeLab.