



“Say Sorry!” How Forced Sorry’s Do More Harm Than Good

by Dr. Deborah MacNamara

If you are around a playground or schoolyard long enough you are bound to hear a child or adult say, “You need to say you’re sorry.” These words are meant to soothe hurts, prevent kids from taking justice into their own hands, and convey rules for behaviour.

You will also hear kids point out insincere sorry’s when they hear them and demand, “you need to say sorry like you mean it!” Forced sorry’s sound hollow because they are usually devoid of genuine caring. The problem is that while we can force a child to say sorry, it doesn’t mean that they feel remorse.

In our haste to get children to look mature and to say the ‘right thing’, we have lost sight that manners must be rooted in the right meanings. What good are manners if they don’t have caring behind them and what are we really teaching a child? While we can force them to say ‘sorry’ under threat of punishment, does this translate into a child doing the right thing when no one is looking? To put it another way – if we make a child repeat caring phrases will this lead to a more caring child?

We also demand caring performances from our children when it comes to saying thank you or giving affection to others. Do we stop and consider whether a child feels gratitude and caring before they say thank you? Do we tell our children to give hugs to people or to be ‘nice’ when they have little desire to be close, thus overriding and discounting the feelings that they do have? Such actions deny a child a sense of agency over their body and their feelings. This is a dangerous practice when considering what kids need to flourish and to be safe.

There is nothing wrong or misguided in wanting our children to grow as socially responsible and emotionally mature beings. This growth must come from caring and not at the expense of it. Healthy development requires that one’s words match one’s meanings. This is the essence of integrity and authenticity, the cornerstones of selfhood. There is a way to get there but forcing our children to give false performances only becomes a mask that wears thin under pressure. The path to becoming civil and socially responsible is made possible through caring, and it is our job to cultivate it.

Focus on caring as a vulnerable emotion

What we need to focus on is whether a child feels vulnerable emotion. Does the child have feeling words to describe their emotions? Can they get to their tears when they are facing things that won’t go their way? Do they feel badly when they have hurt someone else? Many bullies have been told to say sorry to their victims, but this hasn’t changed the bully or made them more caring.

Children will be more caring to others when they are full of caring feelings. We need to get our children to their caring feelings and let these take the lead in their interactions with others. The question is where does caring come from in the first place?

The capacity to care is hardwired into our emotional system at birth but it needs support to emerge. It is ironic and yet a simple design, when we are cared for, the capacity to care opens inside us. Caring needs attachment to kick start it – you need something to care about. In other words, children need to be cared for in order to unlock their capacity to care for others and things around them.

Caring for a child is the work of attachment. When we cultivate strong connections with our children and assume responsibility for taking care of them, a child is brought to rest. As Gordon Neufeld states, “A child must not work for our love but rest in it.” When a child can take for granted that their relational needs will be met, their emotional system roars to life and they are drawn into relationship with their caretakers. Relationship begets relationship; and caring grows caring in them.

A good attachment involves cultivating a strong relationship by providing a sense of sameness, belonging, loyalty, significance, love, and sharing of secrets (see Chapter 4 in Rest, Play, Grow). When our children can take our invitation for relationship for granted, they can rest in our care and grow into the caring beings that nature intended. It is never too late to strengthen our relationship with a child and it is never too late to grow more caring as a result.

What we need to remember is that our children come with an innate caring spirit that grows them into civil, social, and considerate beings. Our job is not to force them to act as if they care, but to grow their caring from the inside out.

Our children’s emotions are in trouble

Caring has become a key focus in educational settings and in the home. We are quick to jump on signs that children have hurt others and grow increasingly concerned with the rise of aggression in schools, bullying among children that has turned lethal, as well as increasing emotional problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicide.

In 2011, researchers in the United States found that in comparison to 15 years ago, youth displayed forty percent less empathy. Along with this finding was a similar decrease in their ability to understand the perspectives of others, an essential component in empathy, along with caring. It is under these conditions that racism, homophobia, and misogyny flourish and take hold. If all you can consider is your own perspective and there is a lack of caring, then a self-absorbed viewpoint can easily become one’s reality.

As children increasingly wound each other and grow more uncaring, we have responded by becoming more preoccupied in teaching them how to care. We never stopped to consider whether caring was something that was meant to be taught in the first place?

We know through developmental science that we are born with deep instincts and emotions to care for oneself and others. This is evident in young children as they take care of their toys or younger siblings. The challenge with young children is that they can only experience one emotion at a time so if they are frustrated, their caring is eclipsed and all we may see is attacking behaviour (see chapter two in Rest, Play, Grow for more information on the Preschooler Personality).

By the time a child’s brain develops the capacity to hold onto two emotions or thoughts at the same time, coined the 5 to 7-year shift, their brain will naturally temper their frustration with caring feelings if present. In other words, nature has an answer to making us more civil and mature by allowing our children to feel caring and frustration/upset at the same time. This internal conflict puts the brakes on a child lashing out without thinking, and allows them to consider how they might hurt

someone and to stop before they do. In other words, it is caring that stops behaviour that is uncivil, unkind, and threatening to others.

Humans are hard wired to care as this is key to our survival. When our children lack caring then it should alert us to the immaturity that still exists in them or that their vulnerable feelings have gone missing. While we can all temporarily lose our caring feelings, when it is more frequent or persistently missing in a child then it can be a sign that something is not working as it should in their world. In short, when a child's caring goes missing it should alert us that they need more care from us.

So what do we do about saying sorry then?

Instead of commanding a child to give a caring performance and say "I am sorry," we need to lead a child to their caring feelings. For some children it is about focusing on the emotion that is driving them – like their frustration. By coming alongside their emotions, we can help them express what isn't working or what they are struggling with. When we convey to the child what isn't okay, for example, hands are not for hitting, we can also convey that the relationship is okay. The focus needs to be on a child's meanings first such as, "Do you have any sorry's in you?" You could also give a child the benefit of doubt and suggest that, "mistakes happen and when they do, we need to find our sorry's and give one to the person that got hurt."

If we believe that children lash out because they have immature brains and that their emotions sometimes get the better of them, then we can be patient and focus on their emotion first. Instead of tackling behaviour, we will have faith that nurturing their feelings is what bears the real fruits of maturity in the long run.

In the children's picture book, *The Sorry Plane*, the mother leads her children to their sorry's. One child gets there quickly but the other child digs in her heels, protesting and claiming there are no sorry's in her. This is a true story – these were my kids and I was that mother in the story. Instead of commanding a false performance, the mother conveys that a sorry is needed and that in time, she believes it will come. While the young child protests and leads them on a wild goose chase to find them, the mother is both caring and firm in her stance that sorry's do come back. In the end, the child softens and tells her sister she is sorry with heartfelt caring and sincerity. There is nothing like an apology full of caring that can draw the forgiveness out of another person. *The Sorry Plane* is a reminder that we need to have faith that caring will lead our children to do what is right.

One day while on yard duty supervising children at an elementary school, a boy ran up to me and told me someone had pulled Thomas's pants down and he was crying. As I reached a hoard of 7-year old boys huddled around a sobbing Thomas, I saw his brother Oscar comforting him. I told Thomas I was there to help and could see he was upset, and that I had heard what had happened. I asked the boys to find the boy who had pulled Thomas's pants down and to ask this boy to come and see me. It was then that his brother started to cry and confessed that it was him who had pulled Thomas's pants down. My heart went out to Oscar, now in equal distress to his brother.

When I looked at Oscar I saw a boy who cared deeply about his brother and was full of remorse for what he had done. I said to Oscar that I imagined he must have been very frustrated if he had pulled his brother's pants down. He agreed and said, "the ball just came and hit me so hard in the stomach that I just pulled my brother's pants down." I thought to myself, of course you did, there was no better person to unleash such pain and frustration on than a brother that cared for you and you

would be safe with. I told Oscar that I could see he was sorry, and that he needed to make amends to his brother. He readily agreed, although I think his brother needed a little more time to find his forgiveness.

The most important thing ...

The most important thing is not the words “I am sorry’ but what is behind it. It is our caring feelings that make us fully human and humane. It is caring that needs to drive us forward. So what is our job then when it comes to raising kids who care?

We must nurture our children’s caring spirits by taking care of our relationship with them. This means we need to support and provide safety when their tears must come. We need to preserve and cultivate our relationship with them by playing together, eating together, and cherishing each other. We must protect against the lure of a competitive, outcome driven, work obsessed, materialistic culture, that threatens to pull us out of orbit from one another. Our greatest gifts and joys are not from things we get nor the depersonalized pursuits we follow but what happens when we show up for each other.

Our most important task as parents is to take care of our children’s hearts. Caring is our superpower and caring is the possibility that lies dormant in each of our children. We bring our children to life through caring, and in return, their caring is a beautiful gift to us all.

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The Sorry Plane is a playful introduction for kids and their caregivers to the importance of understanding and respecting our feelings. Brilliantly illustrated with captivating images by artist Zoe Si, The Sorry Plane carries a profound message about the importance of connecting with our authentic emotions. It highlights how a good sorry is one that you mean from the heart and how we adults can preserve a child’s caring spirit.

The Sorry Plane bears the Neufeld Institute Recommended seal which highlights children’s literature that is congruent with developmental science as well as with the relational-developmental approach articulated by Dr. Gordon Neufeld, PhD