

NATP – Jane Mitchell

“SHOWING” SORRY

One of the biggest issues that parents and carers tell us about, and one that causes massive frustration within families is the inability to show remorse for actions, and refusal to apologise. The child/young person may respond to a demand to apologise by:

- Saying sorry in a meaningless or sarcastic way, leaving us feeling manipulated, angry and frustrated.
- Behaviour may escalate as child or young person refuses, parents insist, child refuses and acts out, whole situation explodes.

As always, the first thing we need to think about is why does the child or young person respond in this way? Our brains are built as a result of our experiences. What were the early experiences of the child?

Pervasive shame

Reviewing the attachment cycle and how our core sense of self is built we know that absence of an attuned relationship causes the child to feel unloveable, worthless and unwanted. They have no self-esteem and their experience of adults is based on unpredictability and possibly cruelty. Such a child **feels shamed by their very existence**. They have fought for survival so far, and do not yet have a secure base of attachment to allow them to have a perspective on adult anger. This may take years to develop. Their expectation may be that they will be hurt, rejected or moved on. They have to protect themselves at any cost, so they lie. The more they are pressed into an admission of guilt, the more they move into overwhelm. Such a child does not understand that they were not responsible for their early life experiences, they feel fully responsible. Forcing this child to say sorry heightens their sense of shame, increasing stress and leading to overwhelm, escalation and backing all parties into a corner.

Developing Appropriate Guilt

A child with good enough parents learns about guilt and appropriate responsibility early on – from before they toddle! Children reach out for things, spill things, throw toys, hurt each other, bite each other, etc. these small misdemeanours are dealt with firmly, the child is helped to see that their actions have caused pain, upset another person or made a mess, and they are encouraged to make some sort of restitution with help. There is a clear connection of the action to the result, so the child learns to feel guilty about **what they have done**. They learn to say sorry, and discover that this heals the relationship, they move on. They have had experience of relationship repair

since they were little, and are secure in their sense of themselves and the world

Because of our own upbringing we may have an expectation that the child will know what they have done and feel guilty (especially easy to assume this with older children) whereas they are **shamed** because their life lessons have taught them that it is they who are bad. If they have not learned appropriate guilt, they do not make the connection that their **actions** are wrong, but believe that **they themselves are bad**. The essential difference between guilt and shame is that guilt applies to an action, whereas shame applies to yourself.

Any attention is better than no attention

Some children are oppositional because it is a sure fire way of maintaining attention. I was told about an overheard conversation between a small (6yrs) boy and his friend – “I am not going to get into bed because I want my dad to come and tell me off”.

No Win Situation

Getting caught up in escalating cycles out of frustration and a determination that they will understand right from wrong puts us in a no-win situation and can be a dangerous mindset leading to increased antagonism in the relationship and increased tension.



What CAN we do???

Step 1:

As Therapeutic Parents we know that the first and most important person to regulate is ourselves. So, step back; take a deep breath; count to 10 (or however high you need to). Remove the child from the situation if they have

hurt someone. Do not be in a hurry unless there is an immediate risk (broken glass, etc).

Step 2:

Calmly state the issue.

Step 3:

Understand that they need help to show sorry, and that they want to do this. Stand alongside and help them. (If they protest their innocence, you can either state calmly that you understand it is very scary for them to admit what they have done, and that you will help them to understand their muddled feelings and help make things better; or you can say "well I am not saying you did, but I think you need to learn how to manage when food gets spilled.." or you can say "I believe that you did do it, but if I am wrong I will apologise later." Remember that they need someone to stand beside them and model the behaviour and help them with their feelings of shame. The aim is to remain non-judgemental.

Step 4:

Give praise for whatever assistance they give

Step 5: (Optional, depending on situation)

Empathic reflecting after the event, and unconditional gesture of regard.

Example 1 – deferred response (Taken from William Wobbly and the Mysterious Holey Jumper – Naish/Jefferies 2017)

Child is playing with fiddle toy (elastic band) to self soothe, when older sibling reaches over and breaks it.

1. Mum takes a deep breath.
2. It's a shame you decided to be unkind to your brother. I will think of a way for you to make it up to him later.
3. Replace item from emergency pack
4. Later on, give the unkind sibling the younger child's chores to do, to show sorry.

Example 2 – Empathic response

It is Dads birthday and there is going to be a small birthday tea with his parents in the afternoon. Jemima is feeling left out, and steals the special biscuits and eats them. Mum finds her covered in crumbs.

1. Mum pauses, remembers how sometimes Jemima eats when she is feeling scared, lonely or not getting attention.
2. Mum says "Oh I was wondering where those biscuits had gone. They were for Nan and Grandad, but it looks like you have eaten them all up!"
3. Mum says "I guess we will need to make more biscuits! Come and help me choose a recipe that we will all enjoy" They make biscuits together as a "time in" (or go to the shop to buy some!)
4. Mum decides these are better than the original biscuits!
5. Mum reflects with Jemima that she might have been feeling left out or forgotten when all the attention was on Dad. Gives cuddle and reassurance that Jemima is never forgotten.

Example 3 Nurturing response

Child pushes sibling or another child, making them fall over and cry.

1. Take a breath!!
2. "You pushed Jimmy, and he hurt his knee. We need to help him feel better"
3. Child protests innocence "We can talk about this later. For now I am going to check Jimmy is OK." You could ask for the child to get plasters, first aid box, wipes etc "I know you want to help me to make him better"
4. "Thank you for..... Would you and Jimmy like a drink and a snack now?" (models ability to repair relationship)
5. Later on, reflect back about the whole situation, how scary it must have been, was he/she worried they would get into trouble? Or identify possible reasons "I think you got really hot/hungry/angry with the game" Ask what could be done differently if they have same feeling again. Give hug and reassurance you are there to help.

Example 4 – Practical response

Jo is playing with a carton of milk. Dad has asked her to stop, as it will be spilt. Sure enough, eventually there is a spillage with splashes everywhere when the carton is dropped on to the table.

1. Dad stops himself from yelling. This is difficult!!
2. Dad remarks – "Wow, that milk certainly goes a long way when it gets spilt. I will get a cloth, and we can clean it up. (Whenever possible, if we as parents say "we" will do something, it implies support and care).
3. Dad and Jo wipe up. (Dad probably does most of the work!)
4. Dad thanks Jo for her help.

Final Note

One last thing. When there are serious incidents under way involving sustained aggression and violence, additional steps need to be taken. We have a handout on NVR, but if you are experiencing violence in the home you should call appropriate professionals immediately.