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The Art of the Apology

The best way to teach your teen empathy is to lead by example.

Your teenager bursts through the front door, awash in hysterical tears. Calmly, you sit her down, and through her sobs, you learn about a bad fight with her best friend—something to do with a text, some gossip, a betrayal.

All of us sometimes say or do things we regret, and teenagers are no different. When a teen causes hurt or makes a mistake, they're likely to feel remorseful, guilty, or uneasy. They know deep down they should apologize, but they may hesitate, afraid of admitting fault or appearing weak.

So how can you help your teenager navigate this important social grace?

The answer, like so many phases of parenting, is to walk them through situations that require a new skill—in this case, offering a good apology.

Think of the last time you separated a pair of squabbling toddlers and told one to say “I’m sorry” for grabbing away the toy. When an older child’s behavior calls for an apology, merely parroting the words won’t cut it. Use teachable

moments, like that fight with a friend, to help them consider their actions.

A sincere apology requires four stages of action:

1. Recognize the offense. Help your teen identify their feelings of regret over something they’ve done or said. Their cue: What do they wish they could take back?

2. Tap into a sincere feeling of regret. Encourage empathy by asking powerful questions. “How would you feel if someone did that to you?” may be a cliché, but it can help your teen adopt the other person’s perspective.

3. Use words that clearly express remorse. Help them crystallize the truth about what they did: “I’m sorry I talked about you behind your back, and I feel bad that I hurt you.”

4. Resolve to make things right. If something was lost or damaged, insist that your teen offer to repair or replace it, even

if it means saving up their allowance for many weeks. If the harm was emotional, not physical, have your teen ask, “Is there anything I can do to make things better?”

What if your teen causes more significant harm, like crashing a borrowed car or playing a hurtful prank? The same principles apply: Help them empathize with the person they hurt, find the right words and actions that will set things right, and follow through bravely.

Soon they’ll figure out that apologizing is a sign of honesty, courage, and maturity, rather than a sign of weakness. And knowing when to apologize is a skill that can later translate into workplace accountability, healthy adult relationships, and so much more.

Donna Moriarty is a writer, editor and author of Not Just Words: How a Good Apology Makes You Braver, Bolder, and Better at Life. Moriarty has a B.S. in social psychology and an MPH in behavioral science and health promotion. She is the mother of three grown children and lives just outside of New York City with her husband and two dachshunds.

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