

Teaching children to apologize:

A Path to Remorse, Repentance, and Reconciliation



Teaching children to feel sorry and apologize is about more than just saying “I’m sorry”—it’s about developing a heart that recognizes wrongdoing, seeks to make things right, and embraces forgiveness. Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught the importance of true remorse, making amends, and extending grace to others. From the Prodigal Son’s humility to Zacchaeus’ eagerness to repay those he had wronged, Scripture shows us that genuine apologies come from a heart willing to change. As Christian parents, we have the opportunity to guide our children in understanding that apologizing isn’t just a social expectation—it’s a way to reflect God’s love, restore relationships, and grow in faith.

Helping children understand remorse and apologizing looks different at each stage of their development. A toddler may not fully grasp the meaning of an apology, while a teenager can reflect on their actions and seek to repair relationships in a deeper way. As parents, it’s important to tailor our approach based on our child’s age and understanding, ensuring that they learn not only to say “I’m sorry,” but to recognize their mistakes, take responsibility, and seek reconciliation. Let’s explore how to guide children through this process in an age-appropriate and faith-filled way.

Before age 3, children are still developing self-awareness, empathy, and the ability to understand cause and effect. While they may not fully grasp the concept of remorse, it is developmentally appropriate to begin laying the foundation for understanding emotions, consequences, and social interactions. At this stage, the goal is not to demand apologies but to nurture a heart that understands kindness, consequences, and reconciliation in a way they can grasp.

Ages 1-3: How to Introduce Remorse and Apologizing

- **Model Empathy:** Show gentle concern when a child hurts someone. Say, *“That hurt your friend. Let’s be gentle.”*
- **Use Simple Language:** Encourage short phrases like *“Be kind”* or *“We don’t hit”* rather than complex explanations.
- **Encourage Repair Actions:** Instead of forcing a verbal apology, guide them to show kindness, like giving a hug, sharing a toy, or patting a friend gently.
- **Narrate Feelings:** Help them recognize emotions: *“She’s sad because you took her toy. Let’s give it back.”*
- **Lead by Example:** When you make a mistake, say *“Oops! I’m sorry. Let me fix it.”* to model apologizing.

Ages 3-5: Learning Basic Right and Wrong

- **Focus:** Helping children recognize when they’ve hurt someone and encouraging simple apologies.
- **How to Explain:** *“When we hurt someone, we say ‘I’m sorry’ to show we care about their feelings. Jesus wants us to love one another.”*
- **Practice:** Model saying, *“I’m sorry”* and teach empathy with simple phrases like, *“How would you feel if that happened to you?”*
- **Biblical Connection:** The Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:3-7) teaches that God loves and welcomes us when we make things right.

Ages 6-8: Understanding Actions and Consequences

- **Focus:** Helping children understand that their actions affect others and that apologizing restores relationships.
- **How to Explain:** *"When we do something wrong, it's important to say sorry and try to make things right. Jesus forgives us when we ask, and we should do the same for others."*
- **Practice:** Encourage sincere apologies: *"I'm sorry for ___, I won't do it again."* Teach them to seek forgiveness and to forgive others.
- **Biblical Connection:** The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18:21-35) highlights both apologizing and forgiving.

Ages 9-11: Taking Responsibility and Making Amends

- **Focus:** Teaching personal responsibility and the importance of making things right.
- **How to Explain:** *"Saying sorry is important, but showing we mean it is even more important. God wants us to learn from mistakes and grow."*
- **Practice:** Help them identify ways to make amends (e.g., fixing something they broke, writing an apology note). Discuss how repentance is more than words.
- **Biblical Connection:** Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) not only apologized but also made things right.

Ages 12-15: Understanding Forgiveness and Grace

- **Focus:** Encouraging self-reflection, empathy, and seeking genuine forgiveness.
- **How to Explain:** *"We all make mistakes, but God calls us to own up to them and seek forgiveness. A real apology shows that we understand how our actions affected others."*
- **Practice:** Teach them to reflect: *Why did I do that? How did it affect the other person?* Encourage meaningful conversations instead of just saying "sorry."
- **Biblical Connection:** Peter's denial and Jesus' forgiveness (John 21:15-17) show true repentance and grace.

Ages 16+: Deepening Faith and Reconciliation

- **Focus:** Encouraging humility, grace, and the role of forgiveness in relationships.
- **How to Explain:** *"Apologizing isn't just about words—it's about taking responsibility, making amends, and learning from mistakes. Jesus calls us to forgive as we have been forgiven."*
- **Practice:** Discuss real-life scenarios and how apologizing can restore trust. Teach them that seeking forgiveness from God and others brings healing.
- **Biblical Connection:** The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) is a powerful example of remorse, repentance, and reconciliation.

When children learn to recognize their mistakes, take responsibility, and seek forgiveness, they begin to understand that grace and reconciliation start with repentance. D.A. Schnabel wrote in the *01/2025 Vision Newsletter*, "Repentance is a profound and transformative journey that culminates in a new way of living." As parents, we have the privilege of guiding our children through this journey at every stage, helping them develop a faith that embraces humility, accountability, and the joy of a restored relationship with God and others.

Further Readings:

Here are some books on teaching children about remorse, apologizing, and forgiveness, categorized by age group:

For Parents of Young Children (Ages 3-8)

- *"The Berenstain Bears and the Forgiving Tree"* – Stan & Jan Berenstain
A great story to help young children understand forgiveness and making things right.
- *"I Said I'm Sorry!"* – Michael Gordon
A children's book that teaches little ones how and why to apologize in a meaningful way.

For Parents of Tweens (Ages 9-12)

- *"Words Are Not for Hurting"* – Elizabeth Verdick
Helps kids learn how their words affect others and how to make amends.

For Parents of Teens (Ages 13-18)

- *"The 5 Apology Languages: The Secret to Healthy Relationships"* – Gary Chapman & Jennifer Thomas
Helps parents and teens understand different ways to apologize sincerely.

For Parents and Adults (For Personal Growth and Teaching All Ages)

- *"The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict"* – Ken Sande
A Christian perspective on conflict resolution, apology, and reconciliation.
- *"Radical Love"* – Shannan Martin
Her writing focuses on radical love and hospitality, extending grace and compassion.