

My daughter, thank goodness, is constitutionally unable to hold a grudge. So when I put my arms around her, she readily squeezed me back. And when we released one another a moment later, I could see that she felt good again. Forgiving someone you care about always makes you feel good. So does apologizing when you know you're in the wrong. That's one of the reasons why I make it a habit to say I'm sorry to my kids. But it's not the only reason.

When I apologize to my daughter, or to her brother—for flying off the handle and saying hurtful things I don't really mean, for overreacting to some annoying piece of behavior, for answering "no" to a request without listening to the reasons behind it, for any piece of unjust behavior that I regret—I'm trying to convey to them several important messages. Above all, I'm trying to make it clear to them that I care about their feelings, that I care seriously enough to take the time to judge my actions, to ask myself whether I'm being

too harsh or unfair, to check whether my behavior stems more from my own stress than from their misdeeds. My apology tells them how important they are to me and how high a priority they have in my heart. Underneath "I'm sorry" I want them to hear, "I love you."

I know I can't protect my children from all the injustice in the world, but I can protect them from my own. By apologizing to them, I'm letting them know they can count on me to be fair, to recant an unjust rebuke or rethink an ill-considered decision. I'm implying—and, I hope, teaching—that acknowledging hurtful behavior toward those you are close to is an important way of maintaining their trust. The person you apologize to learns he can count on you to be on the up-and-up with him, always.

Saying I'm sorry reminds my kids that I'm only human and fallible, but that this is not something that will put them in danger. They don't have to be afraid. If I tumble, I can right myself again and repair the damage I might have caused, in time to keep it from doing real harm. Because it's not lethal, my frailty becomes less threatening and gives them the freedom to be fallible, too. Being wrong, I hope I'm telling them, won't kill you or the people you love.

Finally, when I apologize to my children, I'm trying to model the sort of behavior I want them to make their own. I'm showing them what it means to listen to the inner voices they will inevitably hear from time to time, the stirrings of regret for having badly treated another person—maybe even me. Perhaps I am simply trying to put a guarantee on the future, to ensure that when they eventually break my heart by growing up and leaving me, they will have the good grace to say, "I'm sorry."

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Why I Apologize to My Children

Every weekday morning at 7:20, the school bus arrives promptly at our front door. This is a triviality toward which my 9-year-old daughter is utterly blasé. So on one particularly crowded and anxious morning last fall, when I exhorted her to get a move on, my words fell on deaf ears. At 7:16 she was still dawdling over a hot chocolate and a bagel, pondering which of her classmates she should invite to her sleep-over birthday party (a matter of some urgency, since the event was only two months away).

Exasperated—and suddenly noticing that her feet, swinging languidly under the table, still did not sport either shoes or socks—I started to scream. In a loud and angry voice, I let loose a string of accusations about her total lack of cooperation, her nonexistent sense of responsibility and her general inability to focus on anything important. The feet abruptly stopped swinging, and a hurt and startled face turned in my direction.

"Now go and put your shoes on," I finished sternly, and she quietly got up and left the kitchen. But the image of that wounded little face remained, and I realized almost immediately that I had reacted too fiercely to her lackadaisical, but hardly criminal, behavior. A moment later I followed her into her bedroom and sat down next to her as she pulled on her socks.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I said. "I'm feeling nervous this morning because I have an early appointment and I'm worried about getting there on time. I think that's why I got so angry. I know you can be very cooperative, and I shouldn't have said that you're not. I'm sorry."

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