

Helping Children Learn to Repair Communication/Social Breakdowns

by John Hoffman

Sometimes communicating is easy, and other times it's really hard. One of the most important skills people can develop is being able to repair the communications breakdowns that happen to everyone from time to time. These skills take a long time to develop. Here are some ways to support that development.

Teach children to apologize. A sincere apology is one of the best communication breakdown repair tools of all. Most parents teach their children to say, "I'm sorry." However, children often pick up the message that apologizing is something they should do mainly to get out of trouble. Children need to learn that sincere apologies help the wronged party feel a little better and are often the first step in repairing communication breakdowns.

Point out communication blockers. Teach your children that name-calling, yelling, sarcasm, exaggerating someone else's misdeed, or trying to discuss important issues when you are really upset generally interfere with good communication and that strategies like politeness, patience, and taking breaks to calm down generally help. Look for teachable moments to talk to your children about these issues.

Model, model, model. Children learn at least as much about communication from observing parents as they do from being instructed by parents. So model good communication repairing skills yourself:

- Apologize to your children when you have interrupted them, been overly harsh or sarcastic, or used other communication blockers.
- When possible, take communication breaks if you or the other person (including your child) is really upset. Agree to talk about the issue later when everyone has calmed down.
- Let them see you be the person who makes the effort to repair communication breakdowns.