

## Making amends: Reflection, repair, and responsibility

Are you wondering how to help kids take responsibility for their mistakes and make amends, once you stop using conventional discipline? Teach your child the three Rs of reflection, repair, and responsibility.

### Reflect:

- Ask open-ended questions to help her reflect and develop good judgment.
- Help her “narrate” what happened, so her rational brain gains understanding. This gives her more control over her emotions and behavior in the future: *“We had a hard time, didn’t we? You were so disappointed when I said we didn’t have time to go to the playground today... You were sad and mad... You yelled at me... Then you cried... I hugged you and told you I understood... Then you felt a little better... It’s hard when you want something very much and then it doesn’t happen... I feel that way too, sometimes... It helps to tell someone how you feel... Let’s have another big hug, and later we can talk about what to do next time you feel so mad you want to yell at someone.”*

### Repair:

- Empower your child to repair what she’s damaged, especially relationships. Can she get an ice pack for her brother? Rebuild his tower? Do his chore for him?
- Let your child choose the repair, so it doesn’t feel like a punishment.
- If you model apologies, your child will follow your lead. Don’t force him. Just teach and model and expect repair: *“Your sister was hurt when you said that to her. What could you do to make her feel better? Great! Do you think she might also like a hug?”*

### Responsibility:

- Teach that she can always make a choice of how to act in any given situation: this is “response-ability.”
- Offer observations as he goes through his day to help him notice the choices he’s making and the results: *“Lucas sure looked happy when you gave him a turn.”*
- Unlike punishment or forced apologies, the three Rs of making amends give your child the foundation to manage both her emotions and her behavior. Let’s continue tracking our comparison of what kids learn from conventional discipline compared to empathic limits.

### Empower to repair: Examples

Children want to know how to make things better when they mess up. Not while they’re mad, of course. No one does. But when they’re no longer angry, they want a chance to redeem themselves, to restore their good feelings about themselves, to repair their relationships. Don’t we all?

**Conventional discipline:** *“You go apologize to your brother this minute!”*

**What this teaches:** *“My parents prefer my sibling and humiliate me by making me apologize. I will never be nice to him!”*

**Instead:** Help your child with the emotions that caused her to lash out. Then, once your child has regained her equilibrium, empower her to make things better:

- *“Your brother was pretty upset when you went in his room broke his project. I wonder what you could do to make things better with him? Hmm... You think that would help him feel better? What a great idea!”*
- If she says, *“I never want to make things better with him! I hate him!”* then she’s still too angry and needs your help with her emotions. Go back to acknowledging her feelings and helping her work through her upset: *“You’re still pretty mad at*

*your brother. Right now, it's hard to remember that sometimes you feel good about him and that you could get back to that good place. It sounds like maybe you have something you need to tell your brother... want some help to do that?"*

- Once she's on the road to feeling calmer, try again. If she still resists, leave the repair up to her: *"I know you're still feeling upset at your brother, and I understand why... I know when you feel better, you'll think of the perfect way to reconnect with him and make things better."*
- You'll be amazed that your child will actually try to make reparations, once your family has a clear expectation that that's what everyone does—and once she doesn't feel pushed into it.

### **What does your child learn?**

- *"When we damage a relationship, there's a cost—and I can take responsibility to clean up my own messes."*
- *"I don't mind apologizing, once I calm down."*

### **Help your child reflect: Examples**

Teaching your child the important lessons in life takes a whole lot of listening as well as a whole lot of teaching. But teachable moments are only teachable if the student is ready to learn.

**Conventional discipline:** *"You know better than this... Lecture... Lecture... Blah... Blah."*

**What this teaches:** *"My parents don't listen. They don't understand. I wish I could do better but I don't even know why I always mess up."*

**Instead:** Share your observations without judgment and "wonder aloud" to help your child reflect on why he's acting as he is, and also on the results of his actions.

- *“I know you used that tone of voice because you were worried that we would be late to the birthday party, Amber. I get anxious when I hear shouting, and I can’t drive safely. I wonder if there’s another way to let me know when you get super-worried like that?”*
- *“I notice your brother doesn’t want to wrestle with you these days... I wonder whether there’s anything you can do to help him feel safe and have fun?”*
- *“It’s disappointing to miss words on your spelling test, I know... The good news is that your brain is like a muscle, and if you exercise it, you can learn anything and get smarter. Want me to help you learn your words for next week?”*

### **What does your child learn?**

- *“It’s possible to stay calm and come up with solutions.”*
- *“My parents help me to solve my problems.”*
- *“Even when I get upset, my parents understand that I’m good inside and I’m trying; I was just having a hard time. They’re there to help.”*
- *“I trust my parents.”*

Look at everything your child has learned! Don’t those sound like lessons you really want to teach?