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SAYING SORRY?

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How requiring a child to say sorry kills emergent compassion and substitutes empty words for genuine remorse

SEEING THROUGH MONTESSORI EYES

Upon entering our school, new staff members, parents, and children alike begin the slow process of assimilating into a new culture, a culture grown out of an understanding of the child's true nature. Within this culture, we have elaborated anew each of the daily, ordinary processes, rituals, customs, manners, and practices of daily life and learning so that they reflect Montessori's vision of child development. In our school, we have strikingly different ways of handling what in a traditional school would be called lying, cheating, stealing, or bullying, and their aftermath, apologising. For years it has been my task to write about our culture, its practices, and their meanings so that all of us, parents, children, and staff members, can clarify our thinking. Once clarity is achieved, we must all struggle mightily to maintain that clarity against the natural tendency to revert to the thinking and behaviour ingrained in us during childhood at home and at school.

TAKING A FRESH LOOK

Why would we not, for example, describe a child as difficult or as a problem? Why is it that we don't describe her as lazy or defiant? Why don't we pass judgment on children and dole out punishment? In this particular article, I will discuss why we don't make children say sorry and what we do instead that is so much healthier for their emotional development. The basic underlying principles here are a deeply held trust in the life forces and primal urges driving a child's development and a dedication to providing support and removing obstacles to her self-realisation as an intelligent, creative, and caring human being. Simply put, we recognise the goodness of children and see that it is the environment, at home and at school, that interferes with their realisation of that rightful goodness. We recognise that it is the responsibility of diligently self-monitoring adults to provide a meticulously prepared environment within which children can exercise choice and enjoy freedom, thereby actualising their best selves. This is a child's basic need both at home and at school.

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WHAT DO YOU SAY, BILLY?

Why is it that we never require a child to say sorry? We never even ask it of a child. In fact, we strongly caution children not to apologise. A few years ago on the playground I walked past an adult, new to our school, who stood with two children in the traditional stance. We all know that typical stance where an aggrieved child and the transgressor (words of a convention other than ours) face off while the adult awaits obedience to the command falsely posed as a question, "What do you say, Billy?"

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD OF SORRY

I spoke up quickly, saying, "Whatever you say right now, Billy, do not say sorry. Wait an hour or a day to say sorry. Saying sorry is so important that it should never be done quickly or lightly or under pressure. For now you might say, 'I am searching my heart for contrition,' or, 'I hope I can feel sorry soon,' or, 'I am still so angry that I can't even imagine ever being sorry.' You could say 'I want to tell you all my angry feelings,' or 'You are hurt. May I bring you an ice pack?' or, 'I'm sorry you are hurt but I'm not yet sorry I hurt you.' You might say 'I'm sad,' or, 'I'm scared,' or, 'I'm so angry I still don't even feel sorry you are hurt and that feels really bad.'"

FIRST RESPONSE: EMOTIONAL FIRST AID FOR BOTH

If the child who was hurt were still crying, I would put my arms around them both and say "Two really hurt children. What have they done to each other? One has hit and one has been hit. How can we help them feel better? Do either of you need an ice pack or a wet cloth? Would a drink of water help?" When children's fights are handled in this manner consistently, it is typical for them both to be crying afterwards and for the one who did the hitting to be eager to care for the one whom she hit. This is because the child who has hit has not been taught to separate herself from the pain that brought her to hit in the first place or from the shock of hurting someone. The immediate and authentic emotions remain undistorted and accessible. It is easy to help the children deal with this more straightforward situation. Sorrow for causing pain is just beneath the surface.

HOW THE TRADITIONALLY REQUIRED "SORRY" ACTS AS A BANDAGE, CONSTRICTING SORE EMOTIONS INSTEAD OF AIRING AND HEALING THEM

When one child hits another child, who then begins to cry, it is common for the closest adult or even the closest child to turn to the one who did the hitting and scold him while at the same time comforting the child who is crying. Next, it is common for the adult to request an explanation from the two children and then, following their cross-accusations, to hand down a judgement, solution, or sentence. Finally, the adult demands an apology from the child who hit, or even from both children to one another.

This form of adult intervention effectively separates the children from the original, authentic emotions that led to the hitting and from their emotional responses to hitting and being hit. This intervention overlays the primary emotions that are genuinely related to the event, obscuring them with an unrelated series of emotions resulting from the interaction with the adult. Instead of feeling his original anger and his subsequent distress at having hurt someone, the hitter feels fear of the adult's reaction, defensive of his own actions, justified that he has hurt another, angry that the other child is telling, and confused at the swirl of emotions.

In the early years, a child feels conflicted that he must say sorry when he doesn't feel it yet, but over time he begins to learn to tell that lie, "sorry," more readily and easily in order to save himself. Soon the child who hits develops a facility for feigning contrition and compassion and that false sorry becomes a habitual substitute for the real thing. Some children even go on to say sorry sarcastically, others say it with melodramatic pseudo-sincerity.

STAYING WITH THE CONFLICT UNTIL IT IS RESOLVED

The more effective adult intervention is to comfort both children and hear from both, asserting all the while, with deeply held conviction, that it is not okay to hit and it is not okay to be hit. Both children are enlisted to plan strategies for handling conflicts so that no one gets hit and no one hits. Then, with this bottom line established, the two children are held accountable for figuring out a way to solve current individual problems without hitting or being hit.

First sit down together. Never begin problem-solving while any one is standing up. Wait until the worst of the crying or yelling is over. Let each child tell what happened from his viewpoint, instructing each, "Get ready to listen to all he has to say before you speak. Prepare yourself to say what you have to say powerfully without repeating it over and over again. Get ready to stop when you've had your say and listen to the other person with all your attention."

Support each child to restate what the other child said to him. "What did you do that he didn't like? How did he feel? What would he like you to do instead next time?"

Help the children end the problem-solving session with a quick summary. "Tell him again what he did/said that you didn't like and what you would like him to do/say next time instead. Listen while he tells you again what you did/said that he didn't like and what he would like you to do/say next time instead."

ENLISTING THE COMMUNITY TO INVEST IN SOLUTIONS

For chronic complaints about the same individual who hits often, help the children think in a new way. "What could we do so that she doesn't feel like hitting everyone? How can we tell when she is about to hit? How can we argue in a way that doesn't lead her to an anger that becomes violent?" Inviting the

community to share in the child's development helps them focus on their own role in the situations.

As for chronic complaints from another individual, who gets hit often, help the children think in a new way, "How can he make his point strongly without getting hit? How can he get along with the children so they don't feel like hitting him? How can he get attention without annoying people?" It is important to enlist the help of the community because when they invest in helping the "victim" break out of his role, they become alert to their own part in the process.

HELPING THE INDIVIDUAL TO STEP OUT OF A ROLE

"How can you express anger with respectful words? What can you say instead of calling names? How can you say what you feel without accusing or blaming someone else? What can you say to show strength without making physical threats?"

"How can you be a person who doesn't get hit? How can you be a person who doesn't hit? You have a hidden power in your secret heart that knows how to do this. Speak to that power every night before you go to sleep and every morning when you wake up. Speak to that power when you are about to get yourself hit (or when you are about to hit someone)."

COMING FROM THE HEART

"When you feel like saying sorry from your heart, go and say it." We encourage the children to enjoy the grace of a sincere apology. We acknowledge a child's spontaneous expression of contrition and share it with the community. One day Danny said, "I'm sorry I took your pencil and that you were looking for it for so long. I lost mine and I wanted to start writing on my story right away. I saw you were sad and confused. I'm really sorry."

"Danny, that is the first time I've heard you volunteer a sincere apology. Children, we have something big to celebrate. Danny is growing into saying sorry from the heart." I am delighted to share Danny's development with the children. He has come such a long way. He knows it too, and so does the community. Sorry is a celebration of healing one's self and seeking to heal an experience in a relationship, not a way to avoid an adult's ire, one's own responsibility, or the duty to make amends.

For the first year Danny was with us, we spent a lot of energy getting him to drop saying, "No, I didn't," when everyone saw him do it, and getting him to say, "I wish I hadn't," instead. Suddenly, this year he has developed by leaps and bounds so that he can not only experience deep remorse, but also tell on himself when no one had even seen what he had done. And he can offer a genuine apology as well. The long slow process has been worth the effort and time it has taken.

MODELLING THE BEHAVIOUR WE SEEK

In our community, we adults apologise sincerely and freely to the children when we make a mistake or misunderstand and misjudge. In this way, we model apologising for the children, knowing it to be the most potent way to lead them to do the same. When we forget, must change a plan, or renegotiate a commitment, we apologise because we feel genuine regret. I make sure the children have models of many kinds of apologies from me, light-hearted for leaving my tea cup on their table: "Did you enjoy your tea, dearie? Really, Stan, sorry I left this in your way. Thanks for not letting it get spilled," silly and mildly self-deprecatory if I have taped a note to my lunch basket and still forgotten to bring what I said I would, "Maybe I should have taped it to my nose! Sorry, Ruth, I'll try to remember tomorrow," or anguished if I have stepped on a foot, "Oh, Beth, that must have hurt like crazy. How clumsy of me! Are you alright?" and an endless variety of others. Children are eager to model themselves after adults they love and respect, especially if those adults have a deep understanding of their nature, an endlessly hopeful confidence in their goodness, and a boundless appreciation for their worth.

We acknowledge the sincerity and deep-feeling of children's apologies when they come from the wellspring of their hearts. We stop children and call them to a higher plane when their apologies come from habit, fear, manipulation, control, or avoidance of responsibility.

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