

How to Accept an Apology

Empowering Victims and Educating Aggressors

Written by Josh Schiering, father of five, husband, CEO and Founder of Teen Leader Academy, consultant, trainer and a lifelong advocate for building communities in which everyone feels comfortable and confident with themselves, their leaders and their peer group.

I wrote this “how-to” article over 15 years ago. I originally used it as a way to train 150 youth professionals per year on ways to help empower a victim of meanness, while educating the aggressor in the process. After over 20-years in youth services I facilitated this program to over 5000 staff. Additionally, this outlined strategy is still being used to this day as part of the mandatory School Violence Prevention and Intervention program in New York State for nearly a decade.

As I re-read this worksheet to prepare it for re-publication and use, I felt compelled to add this strong opinion which I had hoped was a take-away from the article without it being shared.

“Unless an apology is accompanied by a change in behavior or actions, the words, “I’m sorry” bare little meaning.”

- Josh Schiering

I want to thank you in advance for taking the time to read, reflect and share aloud. This article is intended to be discussed, debated, elaborated on and enhanced. It is commonsensical in nature, and has successfully empowered thousands of victims to stand-up for themselves, while successfully thwarting meanness and bullying behavior. This article teaches facilitators and leaders to have accountability conversations and to affect change. Please feel free to submit and share your thoughts on this article by writing to the author at josh.schiering@gmail.com.

What is Your Goal

“What is your goal,” is a question you should ask yourself before every action you take. Because by first identifying your goals, for whatever it is you are about to do, you are taking the most critical step in increasing the likelihood of achieving your desired outcome. Additionally, the more time you give yourself to plan out your goals, and the more often you share your goals with others, you increase your probability of success, exponentially.

What do you think the goal of facilitating an apology should be?

Your thoughts:



For the sake of our having singularity of purpose for the remainder of the worksheet, our shared goal when encountering an injustice between two parties will be to:

Empower the Victim and Educate the Aggressor

The Quick and Easy Way Out

STATEMENT OF FACT

- *More than 95% of the time, the response to an apology is, "It's okay."*

Go ahead and please test it out for yourself. Even as adults, we tell *Aggressors*, "It's okay."

Why do you suppose we do that?

Your thoughts:

Some answers might include that

- It's quick,
- It's easy and
- We believe we can all move forward.

But, here are a few questions we should ask ourselves:

- What do we learn from the quick and easy way out?
- What do we teach others about how to treat us in the future if we do not hold them accountable?
- Was the act committed against me truly "okay," and if it wasn't, then why did I tell the *Apologizer* that it was?

APOLOGY (*noun: a·pol·o·gy*)

A regretful acknowledgment of an offense or failure:

Examples:

- 1) *"We owe you an apology."*
- 2) *"My apologies for the delay."*
- 3) *"I make no apologies for supporting that policy."*

synonyms: expression of regret, one's regrets

A Long History of Counterproductive Training

As educators, we welcome the responsibility to take advantage of teachable moments. Lessons learned through these moments help our youth better themselves in real-life future situations. The quick, "It's okay" is counterproductive to our goal of *empowering the victim and educating the aggressor*. It sweeps the issues under the rug. As the victim, it might have toughen up our skin for the next time, but what we really learned was to just 'lookout' for that person in the future. We learned not to trust *that* aggressor. We learned to hide our true feelings and not stand up for ourselves.

Children are often "told" or "forced" to apologize by adults who do not take the time to truly process what has transpired. People often need time to process what was done to them, what was said to them and how it made them feel. I warn you that rushing into a quick apology and a quick acceptance of the apology, is a big mistake and can have the opposite effect of what you are trying to achieve.

I once had two campers, Johnny and Timmy. They got into an argument when Johnny ripped a Buzz Lightyear figurine out of Timmy's hand while saying, "Give it to me dummy!" Well, I immediately swooped in and made Johnny give back the toy and apologize at once. Moments later, the boys were at it again. Johnny learned nothing from the "forced" apology and Timmy was not equipped with the tools to stand-up for himself, as he wept in sorrow for being overpowered, yet again.

Lesson Learned: We must take our time when it comes to helping facilitate *sincere and thorough* apologies.

SINCERE (Adjective: sin·cere)

Free from pretense or deceit; proceeding from genuine feelings.:

Example: "They offer their sincere apology to Lisa and Johnny."

Synonyms: heartfelt, wholehearted, profound, deep

THOROUGH (Adjective: thor·ough)

Complete with regard to every detail; not superficial or partial.

Example: "Planners need a thorough understanding of the subject."

Synonyms: rigorous, in-depth, exhaustive

THE APOLOGY TRAINING WORKSHEET

Listed below is a scripted interaction between two children with an adult assisting along the way (the adult could be a parent, teacher, bus driver, lunch supervisor, camp counselor, etc.). This scenario can be applied to any situation, at any age.

As you read through the training script, and then put it into practice, work to establish the right tone for the two parties. Create an environment of support, responsibility and accountability for one's actions. Acts of meanness and bullying are to be treated as seriously as, and at times more seriously than, a physical act of aggression.

While people are capable of amazing things, they can also:

- Be mean*
- Hurt feelings*
- Cause others to cry*
- Make someone not want to go to school, camp, work, home, etc.*
- Make people feel like they just don't belong*

REMEMBER THE GOAL: Empower the Victim and Educate the Aggressor

THE APOLOGY SCRIPT

SCENARIO

Johnny told Lisa that people don't want to be friends with her because she's "gross." The Facilitator observed the entire situation. Lisa did not do anything to warrant this comment. The Facilitator met with both children independently, away from the group. After establishing the best course of action and goals, the Facilitator brings the two children together.

While kneeling down to the height of the students, to make eye-contact and to not appear intimidating by looking down, the following script guides your conversation:

Facilitator:	Johnny, do you have something to say to Lisa?
Johnny:	I'm sorry.
Facilitator:	Johnny, please look Lisa in the eyes when you apologize. Please try it again.
Johnny:	I'm sorry (this time making eye contact)
Facilitator:	What do you say, Lisa? (knowing that 95% of the time the child will respond with, "It's okay")
Lisa:	It's okay.
< here comes the change >	
Facilitator to Lisa:	Was it okay?
Lisa:	No. (Get her to acknowledge that it wasn't okay.)
Facilitator to Lisa:	Please tell Johnny that you forgive him, but that it was not okay.
Lisa:	I forgive you, but it wasn't okay.
Facilitator to Lisa:	Now let's tell him why it wasn't okay.
<i>The Facilitator now works with Lisa to help identify and articulate reasons why the aggressor's actions were not okay (i.e. it was mean, hurtful and made me sad). Then, the Facilitator guides Lisa to say the following...</i>	
Lisa:	It wasn't okay to do that to me because I am a person and you hurt my feelings with your words. I don't deserve that and it's not okay to be mean to me. Please don't do it again.
Johnny (with assistance from Adult):	I am sorry and I will not do it again. You are right, you do not deserve to be spoken to that way.

Facilitator:

I am very proud of both of you. Lisa, you did a great job sticking up for yourself. You never have to let people be mean to you.

Johnny, though you were mean, you apologized and took responsibility for your actions. I know you heard Lisa and now know that you cannot treat her that way again. I don't want you to treat anyone like that (Facilitator would ask Johnny how he would like it if he was treated that way, etc...).

Now, let's work together, be nice to one another and work to be our best selves today. Students agree, nod, high five or shake hands and return to their activity.

What do you believe Johnny learned from this experience?

Your thoughts:

What do you believe Lisa gained from this experience?

Your thoughts:

IMMEDIATE RESULTS

- Empowered children who can trust adults and now have the support needed to stand up for themselves and who know justice has been served;
- Creation of an environment in which the *Aggressors* knows that the institution and the adults and children involved will not tolerate this behavior;
- *Victims* and *Aggressors* who now have the words to use the next time this type of situation arises.

LONG TERM RESULTS

- More confident children who know how to stand up for themselves;
- Children who can trust their adult role models to be there for them;
- Children who respect others and themselves;
- Team players focused on working together towards a common goal (being kind to others and earning positive reinforcement established by the leader).

FOLLOW-THROUGH

The last steps include circling back to the children later in the day, and week, to make sure everyone is being respectful and supporting one another. Parents of both children may be contacted, as necessary, to inform them of the situation, how it was handled, and how it progressed for each child. Parent conferences might be required as well, depending on the severity of the situation.

APOLOGY CARDS

Apology Cards are a great technique to use at home and school to get aggressors to reflect on their actions. Instead of the quick apology, remove the aggressor from the situation and have them take the time to reflect on what they did. Younger children can draw a picture and dictate the written apology to the adult, while older children (1st grade and up) can write the apology themselves (pictures can also be included and in some cases an art project can also be made - this helps with tactile learners who need to use their hands). After the "timeout/apology card" time is up, the aggressor delivers the note and apologizes face to face. Following these steps makes the aggressor take the necessary time to reflect and consider the victim's feelings. It also enables the facilitator to assess the situation and determine if parent interaction is needed (if there is no remorse I typically send the child home for the day and require an in-person meeting with parent and child the next morning).

PARENT TRAINING

It's easy for moms, dads and caregivers to make use of this training. Parents do not need a formal sit down, just simply do it and watch what happens. The training takes all of about three-minutes (typically) to facilitate. Be consistent with your wording. Eventually, you will be able to ask leading questions and your children will start to add the important elements outlined above to their natural conversations, on their own.