



Repairing Harm Summary

Why Repair Harm?

Children by the age of three are keenly aware that they are their own individual person. Three and four-year-olds will naturally make mistakes, have accidents, and break rules. And when they do, they are only considering their own impulses and desires and not how it might impact you or others. Children require support and follow through from parents to make things better. They need to understand that they always have another chance to repair harm. This skill is developed over time and requires a lot of practice.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- You can ask them about how they are feeling. Begin with the feeling word to help them build a feelings vocabulary. Keep your words short and to the point.
 - *"Frustrated. Are you frustrated?"*
 - *"Angry. Are you feeling angry?"*
 - *"Sad. I saw your friend leave you at the playground. Did that make you feel sad?"*
- You can also ask them about how they think others might be feeling to begin teaching empathy.
 - *"Your sister cried when you said those unkind words to her. How might she be feeling?"*
 - *"When your friend didn't get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?"*
 - *"When you said that to me, how do you think that made me feel?"*

Trap Avoid letting the question turn into an accusation. Remember to stay calm and that the goal of the question is to help the child uncover feelings.

Step 2. **Teach** New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Understanding your own feelings and behaviors when your child behaves inappropriately is a great way to start. It will help you understand what they are learning to do.
- Model behaviors (and your children will notice and learn!).
- Create a calm down plan. *"What helps you feel better when you're sad, mad, or hurt?"*
- Teach positive ways to ask for attention.
- Practice deep breathing to calm down.

- Brainstorm coping strategies and make a list together, such as hugging a pillow, reading a favorite book, walking outside, getting a glass of water, or listening to music.
- Work on your family feelings vocabulary. Use specific feelings words to describe your state of mind and help your child describe theirs.
- Teach assertive communication through I-messages such as “*I feel _____ (insert feeling word) when you _____ (name the words or actions that upset you) because _____.*” “*I feel sad when you say hurtful things to your brother. It hurts his feelings.*”

Tip Deep breathing actually removes the chemical that has flowed over your brain so that you regain access to your creativity, language, and logic versus staying stuck in your primal brain. Practicing deep breathing with your child can offer them a powerful tool to use anytime, anywhere when they feel overcome with heated emotions.

Tip Play feelings guessing games with the family. At a meal, share facial expressions showing a range of emotions and guess which they are.

Trap Though at times it can feel like it, there are no “bad” feelings. Every feeling is a vital message from ourselves. Because feelings are an instant interpretation, we always have the opportunity to reinterpret our response.

Step 3. **Practice** to Grow Skills, Confidence, and Develop Habits

- Use “Show me...” statements like “*Show me how you are able to make things better with your sister.*”
- Accept feelings (even ones you don’t like!): “*I hear you’re upset. What can you do to help yourself feel better?*”
- Offer limited and authentic choices. “*Do you want to talk to her or draw her a picture?*”
- Recognize effort: “*I notice how you went back to your sister to talk to her and make things better after you got mad. That’s how you make everyone feel better.*”
- Proactively remind: “*Remember what helps you feel better? What can you do?*”

Tip After a tough day, your child may be internally beating themselves up for what they did and said earlier. So end the day with love. They need to hear that you love them NO MATTER WHAT on those days in particular.

Trap Don’t move on or nag when your child is angry or upset. Children often need more time to calm down, regain perspective, and move on. Be sure to wait long enough for your child to show you they can take steps to self-manage. Your waiting could make all the difference in whether they are able to do what you need them to do.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills: *"Your sister will be playing with the toy you love today. How can we practice taking turns?"*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing challenges and along with them, stress, frustration, and anger.
- Promote an "I can" belief. Children need to hear that you believe in their ability to mend their relationships.
- Follow through on logical consequences to repair harm when needed.

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Notice even small successes: *"I noticed you were kind to your sister during playtime. That's really taking responsibility."*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. Consider a hug when an effort to repair harm has been made.

Tip Be specific. "Good job" seems not to carry much meaning. However, a specific compliment about a pointed behavior -- *"You took some deep breaths when you got frustrated. Love seeing that!"* -- can promote more of the same.

Trap If you focus only on outcomes -- *"You didn't get angry today"* -- you miss the chance to influence the process. Better to say -- *"You were able to calm down, refocus, and put your train tracks back together."*

Trap Avoid bribes. A bribe is a promise for a behavior, while praise is special attention after the behavior. While bribes may work in the short term, praise grows lasting motivation for good behavior and effort. For example, instead of saying *"If you don't argue with your sister, you'll get to go to the park"* (which is a bribe), try recognizing the behavior after. *"You said you were sorry. I really appreciate that!"*

Celebrate yourself for making it your parenting priority to work on cultivating the social and emotional skills that are most critical for your child's success today and in their future!

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