

On Apologies  
By Sheila Koren

The word apology, like the word sanction, means both one thing and its opposite. We use it to suggest remorse for wrongdoing and supposed empathy for the feelings of those wronged, but also to defend or explain ourselves as not really responsible for the wrongdoing, often because the deed was done, not purposefully, but rather, as my kids used to say--actually the 24 year old still does-- "on accident."

The best kind of apology contains some reparational intent, if not commitment: the replacement of an object destroyed, a concrete plan for changed behavior such as participation in a 12 step program. More often, however, the first dictionary definition holds sway (whatever that means). Webster defines an apology firstly as 'a defense of what appears to others to be wrong.' Only secondarily is it said to be 'an acknowledgement intended as atonement for some improper or injurious remark or act.... accompanied by an expression of regret.'

The fellow on the bus who says he's sorry for stepping on your foot because he had a hard day, was distracted, forgot his glasses and didn't see you because you were standing in his way, may be by dictionary definition apologizing, but he isn't really taking responsibility for the deed. My favorite non acceptance of responsibility is the one that goes "I'm sorry that you feel that way," which really means 'that's your problem that you misunderstood me--no one else would feel the way you do in similar situations.' It's the kind of so-called apology that makes things worse. And if an apology is worth anything, it's in its ability to ameliorate hurt feelings.

I don't mind apologizing myself. In fact, I do too much of it. Living in a state of near perpetual guilt, I'm the type who says I'm sorry to walls I bump into and indeed felt badly for the book whose page I ripped out in order to jot down some thoughts about apologizing. I don't especially appreciate apologies to me, however, unless they're accompanied by action. Apologetic words often sound so empty and meaningless, as in the child who kicks another in the shin while simultaneously whining a loud "Sooooorrrreeeee." There's a lot of talk about the value of intention these days, but a person killed by a bullet aimed for someone else is still dead. I'm sure Hitler intended to do well by the German people. And then there are apologies that are impossible to remedy like the regret of no longer loving someone, that you cannot choose to repair.

It seems to me these days that it's paradoxically both too easy and too hard to apologize. Too easy because all you have to do to qualify as apologetic is say two words. Too hard because in our litigious culture, apologizing might lead to liability.

I never ask—or worse make/require children to apologize for their acts of aggression, mistakes or wrongdoings. I believe in the kindness and usefulness of good manners and hope that my modeling of the willingness to accept responsibility for my actions, including apologizing when appropriate, will impact the children in my care. Forcing an apology where/when it isn't truly felt both promotes dishonesty and provides too easy an

out for some transgressors. The apologizing shin kicker mentioned above is as sarcastic as the kick was sadistic. Besides, a forced apology can becloud the transgressors full view of the impact of his or her behavior by wrapping the scene up too quickly. I remember reading that ice skater Tanya Harding's hockey stick wielding henchman finally confessed to his crime when he saw a videotape of Nancy Kerrigan's face in pain. Since then, fortified by this evidence of literally having to "face" the consequences of one's behavior, I usually ask children to look at the faces of those they have injured. Most children find in this action a powerful reminder of their concern for the other and quickly move to remedy the wrongdoing that created the pained expression they've had to view.

Forcing an apology can and usually does take the joy out of the possible amend making genuine impulse to make right, create peace, show concern. It makes the issue between parent and child or teacher and child rather than between the child and whomever she or he has offended or hurt. A child being forced to apologize to another child is simply obeying an adult. Both children usually know this and no one is satisfied except maybe the adult whose strong-arming allows him or her to believe that s/he did the right thing and is not responsible for anything bad that happened.

Apologizing is, in short, a complicated phenomenon. Communication expert Deborah Tannen likes apologies for their relationship building potential. In England, apparently, saying "Sorry," is as common as afternoon tea. Perhaps the most telling comment on the subject comes from Erich Segal who wrote the famous line for his best-selling novel *Love Story* 30 years ago: Love means never having to say you're sorry. Asked some time back by *Civilization* magazine what he meant by that line, Segal replied, "Don't ask me, I'm only the author." At least he didn't apologize for it.