

Ken Frohock, LMHC, LRC  
AttachmentNewEngland.com

Peg Kirby, Psy.D.  
AttachmentNewEngland.com

Joseph Lyons, Psy.D.  
AttachmentNewEngland.com

## **FIXES: Teaching Children the Art of Repairing Relationships**

One of the most pressing issues facing children with a variety of emotional and behavioral disturbances is their inability to give back to the family the time, energy, financial and emotional resources that they drain. At some point, however, it becomes the responsibility of the children, as they heal, to begin to find ways to repair the relationships their behaviors damage. Holding the children responsible in a constructive way often enhances healing. In fact, reciprocity, and perhaps even empathy, may be learned by developing the skills necessary to repair relationships. Children can be instructed in the art of repairing relationships through understanding how all behaviors fall under one of three categories: pulls, pushes, and fixes.

It is helpful for children to be taught the concept of “fixing mistakes.” This is more than consequences or simple restitution. The main purpose of “fixing” is to repair the relationship. Children who have a great deal of shame perceive their poor choices and related consequences as further evidence of their worthlessness. They get stuck in the belief systems that they cannot do anything right, will never be able to do anything right, and things will never change. This helplessness and hopelessness then triggers a fight, flight, or freeze response that often results in choices that make things worse rather than better.

Rather than referring to the child’s repertoire of negative behaviors as demonstrations of lack of trust — a concept a child often fails to recognize, the behaviors are reframed as “pushes.” This terminology is much easier for the child to understand. He\* knows intuitively that when he is disrespectful, he is damaging the relationship between himself and another person. At the point in time when the child is beginning to desire reciprocity, the concepts of “Pushes, Pulls and Fixes” can be introduced. To introduce this process too soon is to put the child in the position where he will fail, and his failure then may be interpreted by parents as just another form of damaging the relationship. They both become even more overwhelmed by discouragement than they were before. Timing is everything!

“Fixing” creates an opportunity to break away from the cycle of damaging the relationship with the parents, experiencing an increase in shame, and behaving in ways that further damage the relationship. The act of fixing can stimulate the prefrontal cortex and give the child a tool that could be used to avoid the fight, flight, and freeze responses. Fixing empowers the child not only to make a decision to undo a poor choice but also to

change the way that they see themselves and the person whom they hurt. It forces both to focus on the fact that poor decisions can be temporary rather than permanent.

Fixes should be done with very little discussion about the transgression. Talking about the transgression only intensifies the shame and delays the fixing. It is in the act of fixing that the child experiences a sense of competence and challenges his negative beliefs about himself.

Fixing involves an appropriate apology. When the child is expressing some words of remorse for behaviors and is demonstrating some measure of compliance and cooperation, it is appropriate to teach him how to apologize appropriately. This process serves to counteract shame — the child’s sense of failure to be the child he wants to be.

A strong, appropriate apology is a five-step process.

**Step 1: “I am sorry...”**

“I am sorry” should be seen as an indication of a willingness to make things better. It is a phrase that is overused and has lost its meaning often because it is usually followed by the same behavior, which indicates the lack of remorse or learning. We keep the “sorry” in the **apology** in an effort to give it meaning and to remind all involved that “sorry “ is a process and not just a word. By tying the “sorry” to the message that is given rather than tying it just to the behavior, we increase the likelihood that it will be sincere. Eye contact is important during an apology. Eye contact reminds the child that he or she is safe and valuable and capable of fixing things.

**Step 2: “...For.... “**

Here the child cites the behavior that was not respectful or responsible and so pushed someone away or was hurtful somehow. The behavior is framed this way because it clarifies the relationship. Any behavior can be either a pull (as in pulling another close) or a push (as in pushing another away) depending on the context. The recipient of the behavior decides whether the behavior was a push or a pull.

It is important that the child be specific. The specificity helps with the **responsibility**. We believe that without the ability to take responsibility for an action, the child surrenders the power to change it. Children often avoid taking responsibility — forcing the parents to make decisions that they may see as corrective in nature but in fact often reinforce the child’s self perspective as a helpless victim. Step two is designed to help the child take ownership of a behavior and keep the focus on the behavior and not his self-value. Each time the child takes ownership and is not rejected, it challenges his connection between what he does and who he is. It counteracts his feelings of worthlessness. For the child to benefit fully from this step, he must take full responsibility for his actions.

There are three ways that people often avoid taking full responsibility for their actions. These are minimization, denial, and blame. Minimization is when the person who is making the apology also uses words that would make the behavior smaller or less significant. It often contains phrases such as, "I only," "I just," "I accidentally", "It was old anyway", "It was already broken", "You never use it anymore".

Denial is when the person apologizing tries to escape responsibility totally by rejecting any participation in the first place. Common phrases include "I don't know how it happened" and "I found it this way." Blame is the most common form of avoidance of responsibility. In blame, the person tries to deflect responsibility by putting someone or something else in focus. Common blaming phrases include "You made me," "I wouldn't have done (*this*) if you hadn't done (*that*)," and "I'm not the only one who..." Equally unacceptable is when the behavior is blamed on an emotion as in "I was scared," and "You made me mad." Anytime someone spends more time in an apology talking about what you did rather than what he himself did, he is not taking responsibility for his actions.

When minimization, denial, and blame are used during an apology, children are asked to fix their words. If they are unable to fix their words, you thank them for trying, but inform them that you will be happy to hear the rest of the apology when they can take more responsibility.

**Step 3: "...The message I sent to you was \_\_\_\_\_..."**

Here is where the child talks about the impact of his behavior on the other person. For example, "that said that you are not important to me," "that said that I don't love you, that said that my game is more important than you." The focus of this step is to help the child better understand the impact of his choices on those around him and to aid in the development of **empathy**.

**Step 4: "...and I would like to fix it by..."**

Here the child suggests something that he can do to undo the message sent in step 3. He will also specify here how and when he will do the fix. This step is about **empowerment**. In this step the child not only is aware of his ability to correct the situation but also creates a plan to do so. This is also the step in the process in which the child begins to see some form of forgiveness in the eyes of the parent and becomes more hopeful in his ability to correct the situation. The act of coming up with a plan and following that plan successfully fosters the growth of self-esteem and confidence. It is during this step that children begin to master success rather than failure. This step offers the child another opportunity to challenge strongly his own beliefs of worthlessness and creates hands-on evidence of positive change through positive choices. At first, the parent may need to help the child come up with fixes, or if there is another adult available, the child may ask him or her for help. However, it is expected that the child will learn to come up with fixes

on his own as soon as possible. Some parents have found it helpful to list possible fixes on the refrigerator.

**Step 5: “Will you please tell me if that will work?”**

Since only the person who was wronged or hurt can say if a fix is sufficient, it is important that the child acknowledge this. This step is an agreement between the child and the other person. In this step, the parent acknowledges the plan and agrees that if carried out correctly, it will undo the message sent from that child’s poor choice addressed in step two. A fix that is done correctly brings two people closer together than before the negative behavior occurred. It allows the child to feel good about himself and reduce the shame connected to his negative behaviors. It also helps the parents focus on the child’s growth and positive change.

Remember that a fix is not simply paying restitution; it also must repair the relationship. Therefore, if a child steals something or breaks something that belongs to another, that object should be replaced and an additional task should be completed to repair the relationship. Fixes should be realistic and in direct proportion to the message sent by the problem behavior. Often the message sent by the behavior is “You are not important to me.” Some examples of how this may be repaired are

- Doing someone else’s chore for him
- Preparing a snack or meal for the person
- Making a list of things that he loves about his mom, dad, grandmother, etc.
- Playing a game or activity with the person, letting that person choose the activity or make up the rules. The duration of this play should always be several minutes shorter than what the parents believe the child can handle.

Or with younger children

- Rubbing lotion on the Mom’s hands
- Singing a special song for someone
- Making a card or drawing a picture
- Helping with a chore

There must be a way to put the relationship back on track. When the child asks permission to fix what he has broken in the relationship, he is taking back his power to create something positive — not just pain. It is far more powerful for a child to take responsibility for both what he has done and what he is going to do than to be told by the parent what his consequence will be for the behavior. When the consequence is imposed by the parent, it is not as welcomed and not as effective as when the child imposes it on himself. The former leads to resentment and often very poor reciprocity.

Since the purpose of the fix is to give the child the power to repair the relationship, it could be designed to replace energy that has been drained by the problem behavior. Fixes are usually more effective when the fix requires more time and energy than the initial

problem behavior. When done correctly, fixing keeps the focus on pulling family members close.

Fixes do NOT have to be painful in order to be effective. (They may be very painful for the child when he loses out on desired events because he has a lot of things to fix, but that is NOT the intent.) When the focus is on the fix being difficult or unpleasant, then it becomes a form of punishment, which is likely to increase shame and have negative effects on the relationship.

Appreciation for the fix is an important component of repairing the relationship. When the child has done a sufficient fix, it is crucial that the effort and end result are acknowledged. Children with high levels of shame have great difficulty in hearing compliments. In such cases, it is more helpful to focus on the act: “The floor you mopped looks very neat and clean” or “Thank you; your fix worked” rather than on the person: “You’re such a great kid.”

Like most of us, children may need some help coming up with a fix. It may be helpful for them to seek assistance from someone who may have ideas on how to repair the relationship. For example, a child may seek help from one parent for ideas on how to fix it with the other parent. This is a way that parents can show solidarity and support for each other and still present themselves as loving parents to the child.) Teaching a child how to repair relationships is one of the most powerful tools you can give a child. It is important that the parents not only teach this skill to the child but also model it through their own behavior.

If, on the other hand, the child is able to come up with some possible fixes, by suggesting a variety of things he can do to repair the relationship, the child is demonstrating empathy and the ability to take control of the situation in a positive, constructive way.

Children may need to take some time to develop a plan for the fix. Deadlines are most helpful when they are connected to natural motivators such as an interest or activity the child would like to do. For example, a child may be able to go to a friend’s house or out to play when the fix is completed sufficiently. When a child wants to do something and the fix is still undone, the parent may find it helpful to respond with a non-shaming phrase like “Sure, honey, I would love to take you to your friend’s house as soon as you get your fixes done.” Deadlines connected to a specific time, i.e. “I would like that fix completed by 4:00 P.M.” are often less helpful since they often invite an additional control battle.

When anger is present, working with children around fixes will be ineffective. It is acceptable to ask for space by saying something like “I am not ready to discuss the fix right now but I still love you,” or “I will check in with you in a little while and we’ll talk about the fix then.” It is often effective if the parent who has not been hurt helps the child with the fix for the parent who was hurt.

At times, children may use the process of fixing things as an opportunity to act incompetent in hopes that parents will give up. They may also refuse or “forget” to complete a fix in order to avoid being held responsible for their behavior. Since parents control the child’s environment and the child’s time, it is better to be patient than to try to control the fix and make it happen on the adult’s terms. Sooner or later the child will want something enough that he will be motivated to complete the fix. The family members should not miss out on fun times because the child has not completed the fix. It is important that their fun continues so the child is aware of the natural rewards of making good choices. It may seem as though the child is only doing a fix to earn a privilege. This is acceptable because by simply doing the fix, the child is learning a valuable skill and also has the opportunity to become aware that doing something a parent wants and getting closer does not hurt. Fixes may even be fun and the child should like the way they feel as a result of completing a fix.

With very provocative children, fixes are often best taught during a session with a knowledgeable attachment therapist. The therapist can maintain a safe emotional setting, assess that the child is ready to be guided through the apology and that the parents are able to be receptive to the child attempting an emotional repair despite a long history of hurting them.

This process is best taught in a therapeutic setting where both the child and the parent can practice appropriate responses. While it is not a difficult process for those who are automatically empathic and remorseful when they do something wrong, it is an extremely difficult process to master for a child who seldom feels remorse and/or seldom accepts responsibility. Having the child go through the process numerous times during therapy can be helpful. Another helpful tool is for the child to begin to journal things he has done to pull his parents close, things he has done to push his parents away, and things he has done to fix the pushes.

After the process has been introduced during therapy sessions, time may be devoted to recapping how the process worked for both the parent and the child. Then time may be spent on exploring ways to make the process a more efficient tool in the development of their relationship.

The process of fixing is also an effective tool for addressing shame, which is a common barrier to a child’s growth and development. Many children with early trauma and attachment difficulties struggle with negative images of themselves and the world. This is true even when children present as grandiose, over-confident, and self-centered. These children struggle with intense feelings of shame.

Shame can be understood as feeling worthless, helpless, powerless, and unlovable. Because these children commonly expect to be treated poorly and often believe that they deserve such treatment, they may provoke it.

The process of “fixing” when done correctly is an effective way of helping a child grow and learn while avoiding the increased shame that punishment creates. Like any tool, it

may need to be adjusted to meet the specific needs of a family but the basic steps remain the same.

\* For the sake of brevity and simplicity, we are using the pronouns *he* and *his* throughout to refer to an individual child.

## How to do a Strong Apology

A strong apology is a four-step process:

Step 1: Saying, “I am sorry for...”

Name the behavior that you did. This is your chance to practice responsibility and show how strong you are. Avoid minimization, denial, and blame because it will stop the apology from working.

Step 2: “...I sent you the message \_\_\_\_\_...”

Tell them how you think the behavior affected them.

Step 3: “... I would like to fix it by...”

What could you do to pull them back close to you and undue the message you sent through your behavior.

Step 4: “Will you please tell me if that will work?”

Make sure you agree on when, where, and how the fix will take place

 Look in their eyes and say “I’m sorry for \_\_\_”

 I sent you the message that\_\_\_\_\_

 I want to fix it by \_\_\_\_\_

 Will you please tell me if that will work?