

“Sorry”: Building Your Adoptee’s Moral Development

“Sorry for what I did” Sally, age 11, quickly mumbled and then attempted to run off from her Dad as quickly as she could. Dad was dissatisfied with this apology. It wasn’t heartfelt, nor did he feel that it truly demonstrated much remorse. So, at therapy, a few days later, Dad brought up the incident in question, and Sally’s lack of empathy. He stated, “What will happen to her if she doesn’t come to learn that her actions affect others?”

This question arises every day when working with children who have experienced trauma prior to their international or domestic adoption. Parents’ concern in this area is justified. Like Sally, who was neglected in her infancy at the hands of her birth mother, traumatized children do not display the level of moral development in accord with their chronological age. Children who have been abused, institutionalized, deprived, and so on are ages 12, 14 or 16 and are still not showing the type of compassion that allows one to develop healthy relationships.

Moral development is a process just as is learning to walk. The infant first learns to roll over, pull to a stand, balance himself by holding onto the coffee table and then the first step finally occurs! We are all excited! Learning proper moral conduct also follow a series of such steps. The young toddler first comes to understand that mom and dad have rules. Around two, a son or daughter wants to touch the stove. Mom says, “No, that’s hot.” Subsequently, the stove gets touched. Mom comforts the young child and says, “I told you that was hot.” This child has learned that when mom says something, it is to be valued. She knows best—“If I listen to her, I will be safe.” This is the beginning of moral development. The child has learned that rules have purpose and meaning—“I can get hurt when I don’t follow rules.” Also, “Mom isn’t all that happy with me when I don’t listen.” Eventually, these lessons carry over to all interactions with adults and peers.

Overall, moral or conscience development consists of several distinct stages. In *pre-conventional reasoning*, moral thinking is based on rewards and self-interest. Children obey when they want to and when it is in their best interest to obey. What is right is what feels good and what is rewarding. *Conventional reasoning* sees children adopting their parents’ moral standards, seeking to be thought of by their parents as a “good girl or boy.” *Post-conventional reasoning* is the highest stage at which the person recognizes alternative moral courses, explores the options and then decides on a personal moral code (Santrock, 1995).

Adoptive parents may find that the child they adopt displays pre-conventional reasoning well into adolescence or beyond. The child who did not receive the love and attention of a caring parent, the child who was consumed with surviving abuse or harsh living standards, has suffered fractures to his development. Thus, this process of moral development was interrupted. They may not internalize the parent’s moral standards, or at least not quickly. The “sorry” is thus expressed with little meaning. *Developmentally, the child does not have the capacity to display remorse and empathy.*

So, what is a parent to do?

Adjust Expectations

Work to adjust your expectations in this area. Many parents become frustrated by the hollow “sorry.” The apology becomes a battle. The child says, “sorry” and the parent states, “You don’t mean it.” Subsequently, a conflict occurs. Certainly, an apology is to carry some significance.

Yet, keep in mind, your twelve-year-old is really age two in her moral development. We don't expect a sincere apology from a two-year-old. However, we follow through with one apology after another with the belief the child will grow into genuine concern and caring for others.

Additionally, understand that it takes nature well into adolescence to instill a fully functional set of morals and values into a human. You will also work a long time repairing your child's sense of right and wrong. Progress—with the child who has experienced abandonment, abuse, neglect—consists of small steps forward over a long period of time. Progress also includes regression and plateaus. Keep focused on how far the child has come under your guidance, rather than worry about how much still needs to be done. Reflect on your progress often. Write it down and look at your journaling on difficult days. This will help you reorient yourself and keep going.

"I" is Important

Help the child learn to say, "I am sorry" instead of "Sorry." Don't make this a battle. Suggest it, and over time the child will make the change. The "I" helps your son or daughter connect himself or herself to the transgression, whereas simply saying "Sorry" doesn't. "I" lends to sense of self. "I" can do good deeds or misdeeds. "I" can act kindly or meanly toward others. As people we must link our behavior to ourselves. This causes us to define ourselves, and it lends to understanding ourselves within relation to others. "Thus, "I", "I'm", "Me", "Myself" are important.

Restitution

Restitution is a specific form of natural and logical consequences. As was explained in our previous post, *Affection is Wonderful: Will the Behaviors Ever Stop?*, a main ingredient essential for the growth of conscience is cause-and-effect thinking. Children must comprehend the relation of their actions to the consequences that follow. Moral development requires such reasoning skills. That is, children move from cause-and-effect thinking to moral development. If your child makes the same mistakes over and over again, likely, his or her cause-and-effect thinking is faulty.

Restitution is designed to improve logical thought processes. It is also designed to assist your son or daughter in recognizing the impact of his wrong-doing on his or her parents, brothers, sisters, peers and so on.

For example,

Matt, adopted at age 11 months, is now 10. He chronically hits his sister, Betty, age 5. He slaps her face and punches her arms daily! He does this when angry with her, when he wants a toy or when he wants to play the Wii or change the station on the television. Initially, his parents tried time-out, removal of privileges and lecture. When these traditional methods of parenting failed to cease the problem, they shifted to restitution.

As Matt was aggressive toward his sister, he then had to do something nice for her—this is restitution. When you are "mean," you must then be "nice." This is basic cause-and-effect thinking, and this link between "mean" actions and "nice" actions is the foundation on which to build solid moral development.

Restitution can be simple. In Matt's case, he made his sister's bed, carried her book bag to her bedroom, or moved her dinner plate to the kitchen sink. When he didn't want to cooperate with

restitution, his smart mom assisted him. Once at the store, he really wanted a new game for his Game Boy. His Mom said, “Well, I’d like to buy you that game, but I think the money can go to your sister instead. You have been hitting her a lot lately and now she deserves something “nice.” Stunned, Matt followed his mother to the girls’ department and watched while his mother picked out some fun socks and a pretty bracelet. Once home, she had Matt hand the bag to Betty. Needless to say, Betty was thrilled! So, restitution not only helps the troubled child learn appropriate social norms, it also offers a “nice” way to show your typical children that you are working to resolve the issues in the family.

Follow Through!

Weary from running kids to soccer, attending IEP meetings and therapy appointments, making dinner, working, laundry, grocery shopping, yard work and car maintenance, it certainly seems easier to pass over opportunities to implement restitution. Ask yourself, “It it really easier?” The answer is actually “No.” If you don’t attend to the task of conscience building, the negative behaviors will continue to occur. He or she isn’t going to “grow out of it.” Instilling a system of morals and values in any child takes time. It will take greater time with the traumatized child—likely hundreds of repetitions of restitution! As situations arise, take the few moments needed for the child to apologize, “I’m sorry for....” Help the children involved select an appropriate restitution. Again, keep this simple. A three-minute chore is more than effective.

Enhance Attachment

There always seems to be a lot of confusion about what is an attachment-related issue and what isn’t. Moral delays as well as faulty cause-and-effect thinking are issues that are related to attachment. A hallmark of attachment problems is delays in cognitive, emotional and social domains of development. Children who fully attach to their parents, take on the morals and values of the parents. They move to conventional reasoning—this is cognitive and social growth. Children who remain “stuck” in pre-conventional reasoning are not moving forward as they should. Now, this doesn’t mean that your child has a full-blown [Reactive Attachment Disorder](#). This means your child’s attachment hasn’t solidified. Thus, using known tools effective for improving your parent-child attachment, perhaps seeking the assistance of an [attachment therapist](#) may be of benefit.

Won’t it be “nice when your child’s morals and values “catch up” to yours! Get started today. In time, you’ll be glad you did!