



Building Stepfamilies That Work ©

The “Language” of Apology

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Preamble: When we have said or done something that was hurtful to another, an apology is appropriate—even if our thoughts, words or actions were not intended to hurt, or offend that individual in any way. When an apology is called for, but goes unspoken, the relationship between the involved parties can become cold and distant, or deteriorate into an unending succession of hurtful exchanges.

According to Dr. Gary Chapman, the author of *The Five Love Languages*, we all have a primary way (that he refers to as a “language”) of expressing our affection—and a primary “language” through which we are most likely to “hear” affection being conveyed to us by another. Based upon his research with Dr. Jennifer Thomas (reported in *The Five Languages of Apology*), Dr. Chapman believes that apologies are highly subject to this “language” effect. As a result, even when apologies are appropriately issued, he cautions us that they will be seen as ingenuine if they fail to use the essential “language” of the person who has been hurt or offended.

He details a “fail-safe” formula for constructing an apology that targets each of these “languages”. Some individuals will need only one of the five components. Others may require several or all of them in order to “hear” the apology as genuine. This is vitally important because “a hurt won’t be healed until it is heard”.

Dr. Chapman’s formula* is as follows:

1. Express regret: Say: “I’m sorry.”
2. Accept responsibility: Say: “I was wrong for....”
3. Address restitution: Say: “What can I do to make it right?”
4. Genuinely repent: Say: “I will do my level best to not think/say/do that again.”
(Then, abide by your word.)
5. Request forgiveness: Say: “Will you forgive me?”

** We believe that because of gender-based differences, you should use the formula as it appears above if you are apologizing to a female. However, if you are apologizing to a male, we suggest stating point number two first.*

The unsettling part about component number 5, is that it leaves the state of the relationship entirely up to the other. Whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not, most of us struggle a great deal with the idea of giving control (of anything that is important to us) entirely over to another.

Based upon our counselling work with couples, an inability (or an unwillingness) to forgive the “offender” is not uncommon. When this is the case, consider the following:

- Most often, when the “transgressor” cannot be forgiven, it is because the individual being asked for their forgiveness, needs to forgive themselves first—for their part in the issue—but is unable to do so. If you are finding it difficult to forgive, it can be remarkably helpful to remind yourself: “To err is human. To forgive is Devine”. When

we are able to find true forgiveness in our hearts, we literally transcend the limits of our essential humanness.

- When an inability to forgive one's self is not at issue, the failure to grant forgiveness may be linked to a wish to see the transgressor punished and suffer. When this is the case, it is useful to ask: "How will you know when I've been punished enough?" This question presupposes that the punishment will end at some point in time—so the process of healing can begin.

Part 1: An In-class Exercise

The first part of this exercise is really a "test drive" of Dr. Chapman's formula. It is designed to give you an opportunity to:

- a) practice developing an apology according to Dr. Chapman's formula, and
- b) learn which of the components are most important—or even essential—for you and your partner.

The Scenario: Let's say that last week, your next door neighbours, the Smiths, were over for a visit. During the visit, your partner brought up an issue that you had assumed was a very personal and private concern. While it was occurring, you simply couldn't believe that your partner would have mentioned the issue to anyone. After the feeling of shock had passed, embarrassment set in, and the rest of their visit was awkward and humiliating. Since then, 1) you have been finding it exceptionally difficult to leave the house, apprehensive that you will encounter one of the Smiths out in their yard, and 2) you have (in a very frank, but self-possessed way) made your partner aware of your reaction to the event, and the developments to follow from it.

The Assignment:

- 1) We want you both to assume that you are the partner who made the disclosure to the Smiths. Spend some time considering your part in the incident, and the way it impacted your partner.
- 2) Write down an apology, according to Dr. Chapman's formula, that fits with the circumstances reported above, your reflections on the incident, and so on.
- 3) Flip a coin to see who goes first.
- 4) The "winner" of the coin toss will give their apology to the "loser" of the coin toss. [Avoid reading the apology. Do your best to say it as you would if the event were, in fact, true. If necessary, use the following cue words to help you with your delivery:
 - regret (or insert responsibility if apologizing to a male)
 - responsibility (or insert regret if apologizing to a male)
 - restitution
 - repent
 - request forgiveness]
- 5) As the "loser" of the coin toss, you will listen to your partner's apology. Just listen when your partner is delivering their apology. Pay particular attention to the

meaning/impact that each of the components has upon you. Make mental notes about anything else you notice about the apology and/or its delivery.

6) Exchange roles and repeat the delivery of the apology in the same fashion, so the “loser” of the coin toss is now issuing his/her apology, and the “winner” is paying attention to the impact that the five components of the apology makes, and so on.

7) Now discuss your experience of formulating, issuing and hearing an apology constructed according to Dr. Chapman’s formula with your partner. Strive to learn which components are most important for you, and which are most important for your partner.

Part 2: Your Homework

If you are both feeling comfortable with the formula, you may wish to consider using it to address a real-life incident of the recent past that left you feeling unsettled or bothered.

Should you wish to do so:

- ensure that your partner is in agreement, and has an incident he/she wishes to address—or is OK with restricting the agenda to the item you wish to address.
- do your best to pick an incident that was unsettling or bothersome—rather than devastating or shattering. Remember, the purpose of the exercise is to develop a skill.
- ensure that you inform your partner of the specifics of the incident. If in doubt, refer to the scenerio reported above to get an idea of what is necessary.
- Remember, when you are the listener, it is your job to listen—not to defend, argue or deny.
- Remember to discuss the impact that hearing the apology has upon you.

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