

"Making It Right"

A Process of Restitution

By K. Meagan Ledendecker



After a great deal of crying and feeling horrible about how she had treated her sitter, my eight-year-old decided to write an apology note. When she was done, we brainstormed ways she could try to make amends for her actions. The process wasn't an easy one. When we make mistakes, it can feel like squeezing too much toothpaste out of the tube. Getting the excess back in can feel virtually impossible.

My daughter's process was fresh in my mind as I milled about after a workshop with other Montessori teachers discussing how children confront social challenges. One teacher shared that when a child apologizes, he acknowledges the apology as a good first step, but that it is only that . . . a first step. This comment caught my attention.

How do we support children who have made a mistake and aren't sure about how to make amends? Genuine apologies certainly aren't easy, but it's a lot easier to apologize for a mistake than it is to fix it. With this in mind, I began exploring Diane Gossen's work on restitution. The definition of restitution revolves around restoration – restoration of something damaged, lost, or stolen – basically restoring what was affected to its original state.

Gossen's recipe for restitution, though, is designed to help the mistake-maker experience a healing process, a self-restoration perhaps. According to Gossen, the process of making things right again should include the following components:

- ◆ The person(s) affected by the mistake will feel that the restitution is acceptable and appropriate.
- ◆ The restitution will require effort.
- ◆ By making amends, the mistake-maker will be discouraged (or at least not encouraged) to repeat the mistake.

For the process to be really exceptional, three other characteristics may be involved:

- ◆ The restitution will be logically connected to the mistake.

- ◆ The process will connect to a deeper understanding or big picture of how people treat each other.

- ◆ The experience will actually strengthen the mistake-maker.

Gossen notes that in supporting the process of making amends, we must be very careful to refrain from criticizing, inducing guilt, or expressing anger. Also, we must not feel like we are overextending ourselves. The person trying to fix the mistake must own the process.

I've been attentive to chances for my own children to try to make things right. Recently when my four-year-old, in a state of extreme frustration, tossed his plate to the ground, I saw his outburst as an opportunity.

When the plate hit the concrete patio it shattered into an infinite number of shards. Sharp shards. I didn't react, though. I let him feel the intensity of the moment. After a bit of time passed I let him know that I would be willing to help him, but that the pieces would all need to be cleaned up from the patio so they wouldn't cut our feet. He got me shoes. He picked up shards. He got a little cut on his finger. He retrieved the dustpan and dust brush to help sweep. The process was long and effortful.

Later when I was tucking him into bed, I reflected aloud about how hard he had worked to fix his mistake. He nodded and snuggled into me. Although the plate had shattered, my son's sense of how to make things right certainly seemed strengthened. He didn't need to apologize. His actions were restorative.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker, cofounder of The Montessori School of the Berkshires in Lenox Dale, Massachusetts, appreciates all she's learned from her mistakes. She hopes one day her three children will feel that way, too. You can learn more about The Montessori School of the Berkshires at www.berkshireremontessori.org.

