



The Three R's of Recovery: A Positive Discipline Approach to Mistakes

By K. Meagan Ledendecker

It was the throwaway apology that really started to get under my skin. My four-year-old had picked up the habit of tossing out “I’m sorry” like a used tissue. Completely overused, the expression began to feel devoid of worth. He’d speak the words, but I got the sense that he didn’t actually feel a sense of remorse or regret, much less a desire to make amends.

I’ve never been one for insisting that children apologize, especially right at the tail end of a heated moment. For goodness sakes, when I am tired or hungry or stressed and make a snarky comment, I’m not usually feeling particularly sorry – more like ticked off and cranky. Later, after I’ve had time to take some deep breaths, or perhaps tend to my low blood sugar, I feel a deep sense of regret and desire to make things right.

Because our children tend to replicate what they see in us, I decided to first make sure I wasn’t just using “sorry” as an easy way out. And to really model a different approach, I took some time to reorient myself with the “Three R’s of Recovery” from Positive Discipline.

When we make mistakes, we have an opportunity to make amends and even learn from the experience. In Jane Nelson’s Positive Discipline work, the “Three R’s of Recovery” offer steps to follow after calming down. The first R stands for recognize, and with this we verbally acknowledge our mistake and take responsibility for our actions. To really do this effectively, we must also be sure to keep any hint of blame out of the picture.

So if I’ve snapped at my children and later have cooled off, then I might say something like, “I feel really bad about when I snapped at you. You don’t deserve to be treated that way.” Notice that I didn’t weave in any know-it-all finger wagging about things they

had done to push my buttons. Rather than blaming them, I took responsibility for the choice I made in the moment.

Next I can reconcile by apologizing. This can be as simple as just saying, “I’m sorry.” I’ve found that when I’ve really taken responsibility, the reconciliation comes from a genuine and heartfelt place. And children are so forgiving and understanding. Perhaps we could learn a few things from them in this regard.

Finally, the third R is for when we resolve the problem. At this point, we work together to find a respectful solution. Often after really taking responsibility and reconciling, everyone is feeling open and willing to collaborate. If the time isn’t right for a brainstorming session, it’s important to set and stick to a later date for problem solving. When given the opportunity to share ideas in a safe, respectful forum, children often can help come up with incredibly creative solutions.

As I put the “Three R’s of Recovery” into practice, I found that my four-year-old (and my other children, too) were able to be more mindful after their less-than-ideal moments. Our mistakes began to become less about what we had done wrong and more about the kind of people we wanted to be.

~ K. Meagan Ledendecker is the Director of Education at The Montessori School of the Berkshires. Meagan cofounded the school ten years ago with her husband, Todd Covert. Having grown up in a Montessori environment, Meagan internalized at a young age that mistakes are opportunities to learn. She has also found that parenting offers plenty of opportunities for learning! www.berkshireremontessori.org.

