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Relationship Repair: Reconciliation, Intention Assignment, Forgiveness, and Conflict Resolution

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As parents, we are often at a loss when we try to help our children with hurtful behavior. Punishment, consequences, time outs and lectures often have little effect with children attachment challenges. More importantly, these measures can create distance and resentment in relationships without making any great improvements in behavior. Here are some tools offered by experts in peace education and peace building. The same tools work for spouses, parents and children, or warring nations.

Reconciliation is about healing a relationship after a wrong or a hurt has been done. It is a process between two or more people or among groups of people. The six steps of reconciliation are:

1. The person who hurt needs to acknowledge the hurt done to the other person. Until everyone is effective with this skill, this will require assistance from a parent. The hurt person might need to be encouraged to state how he or she feels and the effect the hurt had for him or her.
2. The person who hurt needs to accept responsibility without excuses or blame. The person who hurt needs to take this responsibility with heartfelt understanding of the hurt done. Again, this will require coaching and support from a parent.
3. Next, the person who hurt must apologize and ask the hurt person for forgiveness. This again must be heartfelt and come from an understanding and acceptance of the effect of their actions on the other. This might also include a promise of not doing this again.
4. Now, the hurt person must be willing to end the problem by accepting the apology and giving forgiveness. The hurt person might also be thankful for the apology and the opportunity to have their feeling heard, understood and that the other person accepted responsibility for his or her actions.
5. The person who hurt now must compensate the person he or she hurt by making the hurt better in some way. If some property was damaged (for example, clothing torn in a scuffle), the person who damaged it might repair it. If the person's feeling were hurt, a small gift or act of kindness will begin to repair the relationship.
6. Finally, one of the most important steps is that both individuals need to acknowledge that the hurt is over and that it needs to be put in the past. Talk about the incident should focus on giving and getting forgiveness, not about the hurt that was done.

Forgiveness is often difficult to ask for and to give. It is important to know the intention of the person who hurt. Intention might be:

- a) Completely accidental such as bumping into someone that you did not see.
- b) Mistaken intention such as taking hold of someone but then seeing it is the wrong person.
- c) Well-intended but with unforeseen hurtful consequences such as helping an elder to their feet but taking hold of his or her sore arm.
- d) Avoidable or careless such as running through a crowd of people and bumping into someone.
- e) Negligent intention such as starting a fire to burn some debris and setting your neighbor's shed on fire. Careful planning, forethought, consideration of other and caution prevent negligence.
- f) Malicious intention in which harm is meant to be done but occurs as a result of impulse such as bad actions done during an angry or emotional outburst.
- g) Malicious intention with premeditation (planned) is truly immoral and often illegal.

It is important to know the intention of the person who hurt. It is easy to forgive completely accidental mishaps. As we go down the list it becomes harder and harder to forgive. One problem is that the person who is hurt often attributes greater intention of harm than the person who hurt intended. Persons who hurt are less likely to take responsibility if their actions are said to be of greater intention than they truly were.

In reconciliation discussions, it is important to work out the intention of the person who hurt. In younger children, most levels of intention are seen frequently. Parents need to have a clear understanding from the child who hurt what the intention was and be sure that the child who was hurt does not attribute a more harmful intention. Notice that we do not use labels such as 'victim' or 'aggressor'; this helps to focus on the act rather than the child. Parents need to be very concerned if young children act with premeditated malicious intent. Special care needs to be directed toward such children so that they have little opportunity to harm others and lots of opportunity to have guidance and support. Punishment and consequences will likely have little impact except to make the child more secretive in his or her actions. Helping these children to learn to take responsibility and go through the reconciliation process will assist them in being less hurtful. It is important to remember that once the reconciliation process has been completed and the relationship has been repaired, no further consequences are necessary. This helps children and their parents get out from under long groundings, timeouts and extended consequences. The message is: you have hurt someone, and when you have repaired the relationship the hurt is healed.

Conflict resolution: In a conflict or a fight, both sides are hurting the other, whereas in a reconciliation, one person hurt another. Parents need to help children repair their relationship after a conflict. Parents can help guide their children through the steps of conflict resolution rather than try to act as police, judge and jury. At the end of the process, the conflict is resolved and relationships are healed. No further punishment or consequences are necessary. Parents need to coach and praise throughout the dialogue. The steps are:

- I. Have one person tell about his or her experience, feelings and what he or she needs. (When you take my things, I feel very frustrated because I keep looking for them and I can't find them. I feel that I can't trust you. I need you to respect my property.)
- II. Have the other person repeat what the first person said. Be certain there is

understanding without defensiveness. (You can't trust me when I take your stuff and you get mad at me because you're mad because you can't find it.)

III. Have the second person tell about his or her experience, feelings and what he or she needs. (When you get mad and hit me, I get mad. I always get blamed for everything and you get more stuff than I do anyway. I need everyone to stop blaming me. I need you to stop hitting me.) Lots of parent dialogue about these feelings with both children.

IV. Have the first person repeat what the other person said. Be certain that there is understanding without defensiveness. (You get mad when I hit you and you feel blamed. You need to not get hit and not feel blamed.)

V. Now have everyone think of as many solutions to the problem as possible. Think of ideas are creative, unusual and very different. Think from many perspectives. This step can be fun since no idea is too silly or foolish to bring forward. Once an idea is put on the table, it belongs to the group. Everyone has to release their attachment to their own suggestions.

VI. Choose the best solution.

VII. Do it.

The most important aspect of this process is that the result is an end to the conflict and a repair of the relationships. Once the process is completed, the solution must be followed. Children need to be in a regulated emotional state to begin this process. It can take a few attempts to get through to the end, as children may require soothing and re-regulating. It helps to have the steps written out and to practice with a made up scenario (one that is silly and funny would help keep their interest!).

As skills increase, the dialogue becomes:

When you....., I feel....., and I need you to..... . I will..... to help that happen.

It is very important for parents to model these steps in their own conflict resolutions.