

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

As parents, we need to help our children when they engage in hurtful behavior. Punishment, consequences, time outs and lectures often have little effect, especially with children attachment challenges. More importantly, these measures can create distance and resentment in relationships without making any great improvements in behaviour. 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.

So, let's start with an example of a child hurting her sister. Let's imagine they are 11 and 9 years old. The 11 year old Jane has had a rough day at school, comes home, snapping and snarling, and shoves her 9 year old sister Sarah out of the way at the fridge. In this example, one person has hurt another person; Jane hurt Sarah. The hurt is in one direction. That means we use RECONCILIATION as a tool to repair the hurt. Reconciliation is about healing a relationship after a wrong or a hurt has been

done. It's a process that can be used between two or more people or among groups of people. The key is the harm or hurt was in one direction; one person or group hurt another person or group.

The six steps of reconciliation are:

Step 1! The person who hurt needs to acknowledge the hurt done to the other person. Jane needs to acknowledge that Sarah was hurt. This is hard for Jane to do. Until Jane is skilled with this, she will need assistance from her parent. Sarah, the hurt person, might need to be encouraged to state how she feels and the effect the hurt had for her. It might go like this:

Jane is fuming. Sarah is crying, having hit her back on the counter.

Parent: Jane and Sarah, what's happened here?

Jane: She was in my way!

Sarah: She pushed me and I hit my back!

Both children need calming and soothing before going on. This is a crucial point because if you don't re-regulate them, they will get into a bigger argument. Sarah is hurt so she gets soothed first.

Then, the same soothing is given to Jane, who hopefully accepts it. Don't proceed until you have two calm children. Then:

Parent: Jane can you tell Sarah what you did?

Jane: You were hogging the fridge, so I pushed you out of the way.

Parent: So, you pushed Sarah. (notice how this skilled parent just ignored the provocative comment) What happened to Sarah? Can you tell her?

Jane: She hit her back. I can't help it if she's so clumsy.  
Ok so Jane has said she pushed Sarah and Sarah hit her back.  
Good enough.

Step 2! The person who hurt needs to accept responsibility without excuses or blame. Jane needs to take this responsibility with heartfelt understanding of the hurt done. Again, this will require coaching and support from her parent. It might go like this:

Parent: Thank you Jane, I know that this is hard for you. You do seem to be angry about something. We can talk later about that. Right now, I hear that you think that Sarah being clumsy was

to blame for her getting hurt. Did Sarah get hurt because she is clumsy or because you pushed her?

Jane: I am mad. And I did push her. And yeah, she hit her back.

Parent: Thank you Jane for taking responsibility for hurting Sarah.

Step 3! Next, Jane needs help to apologize and ask Sarah 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.

Parent: Jane, even though you are mad about something, I don't think Sarah has anything to do with it. She is hurt. What do you need to do?

Jane: Sorry, Sarah. Sorry I hurt you. I shouldn't have pushed you.

Parent: Sarah, Jane has apologized for hurting you.

Sarah: You really hurt my back! You shouldn't have done that.

Step 4! Now, Sarah must be willing to end the problem by accepting the apology and giving forgiveness. Sarah might need help to accept for the apology and take the opportunity to have her feelings heard, and accept the other person taking responsibility for her actions.

Parent: Sarah, Jane has taken responsibility and apologized. She knows she hurt you and has said that she was wrong. What can you do now to help with the solution to this problem?

Sarah: I'd like to push her back but I think I should accept her apology. Thank you, Jane for apologizing. I forgive you.

Now Step 5! The person who hurt now must compensate the person 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. In this example, Jane might offer a gift of food.

Parent: Jane, what kindness might you now do for Sarah since you hurt her?

Jane: I think we are both hungry, so I could make us a snack.

Parent: Is that Ok for you Sarah?

Sarah: Yeah! How about some cheese and apples?

And 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.

Parent: Wow, you girls are getting to be really good at repairing hurts. I love the way you were able to ask for and give forgiveness.

Jane: Sarah, let's go outside and shoot some hoops after our snack.

Not easy. It takes lots of learning and coaching at first. In the end, your children will have the skills to do it on their own as they go out into the world. It might help to have a family meeting and learn the steps to reconciliation and repair. You might post the steps on the fridge door and use the steps to guide you as you coach your children.

Despite our best efforts, **forgiveness** is often difficult to ask for and to give. One thing that gets in the way is misunderstanding the intention of the person who hurt. It is very

important to know the intention of the person who hurt. Intention varies from no intention at all to pre-meditated, planned and malicious intention. Here are all the different levels:

**Completely accidental** such as bumping into someone that you did not see. It is easy to recognize this usually and so, it is easy to say sorry and accept that apology immediately. In this example today, this would be the case if Jane had bumped into Sarah accidentally.

**Mistaken intention** for example being playful but causing harm, such as Jane playfully hip-checking Sarah, and Sarah hitting the counter.

**Well-intended but with unforeseen hurtful consequences.** In our example, this would be the case if Jane had hugged her sister, but Sarah had a sore back.

**Avoidable or careless** such as Jane in our example. She was angry, she didn't intend to hurt her sister, however she did through her avoidable and careless action.

**Negligent intention** such as starting a fire to burn some debris and setting your neighbor's shed on fire. Careful planning, forethought, and consideration of others prevent negligence. If

Jane had thought “I’ll just push her so I can get my snack first” she would have intended to push her, not necessarily cause her harm.

**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. If Jane had been in a rage, yelling, highly aroused and dysregulated, and pushed Sarah causing harm, and yet would be unlikely to do so when calm, this would be an example of malicious intention during a dysregulated state. A crime of passion so to speak.

And lastly, **malicious intention with premeditation** (planned) is truly immoral and often illegal. This would be the case if Jane was planning to hurt Sarah, thinking about it in advance and doing so in a calm (ish) state of mind.

Wow, that’s a lot of levels of intention. From completely accidental to premeditated malicious intent.

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 thinks there was a greater intention of harm than the person who hurt intended. So if Sarah thought that Jane had planned to hurt her, looked her in the eyes and pushed her hard, Sarah would have a much harder time forgiving Jane and rightfully so. And then, if Jane was accused of this, she would less likely take responsibility for hurting Sarah because she had not hurt her in that way, with that in mind. The person who hurt is less likely to take responsibility if her actions are said to be of greater intention than they truly were. In repair and 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 think or feel there was a more harmful intention. Notice that we do not use labels such as 'victim' or 'aggressor'; these labels are not what we want our children to take on for themselves or others. 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.

Next time, we will talk about conflict resolution which is the tool we use when two people hurt each other and the hurt is in two directions.