What to say after you snapped at your three-year-old

"I just yelled at my three-year-old for spilling juice and now they're crying. What exactly do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Okay. Mistakes were made."

You shouted, the juice is still on the laptop, and a small face is crumpling. The office reflex is "mistakes were made," a sorry that names nobody. Try the other kind: owned, and said once you are calm.

Why going back matters

In one study, researchers watched 96 mothers with their three-year-olds work through a hard puzzle task and other ordinary moments. Across those moments, the pairs repaired about half of their tense moments, meaning they found their way back to a warm exchange. Pairs who repaired more during the hard puzzle had children whose teachers rated their emotion regulation better four months later. This is a link in one group of three-year-olds, not proof that any one sorry does anything, and the researchers measured a return to warmth rather than an apology.

Pediatricians' guidance points the same way. The American Academy of Pediatrics describes yelling at or shaming a child as minimally effective in the short term and not effective in the long term, and its parent advice is to wait until you have cooled down, apologize, and say how you will handle it next time.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I was upset about the juice, but it wasn't okay to raise my voice."

What the words do

Take 2 names what happened and takes responsibility for the part that was yours. "I was upset about the juice" is honest without being an excuse; "it wasn't okay to raise my voice" is the owning. Say it at your child's height, slowly, and then offer a hug or sit close. That is the reconnecting. For a two-year-old, the first sentence is enough.

Coming back with a sorry is for an ordinary bad moment. If shouting happens most days, or turns into names, threats or hitting, get help. The same if your child seems afraid of you, or you're scared you might hurt them. Talk to your doctor, or call a parent helpline. Asking for help is a strong thing to do.

If you or a child are in danger, contact emergency services (911 in the US, 999 in the UK). US: National Parent & Youth Helpline, 1-855-427-2736 (call, text or chat, 24/7). Childhelp, 1-800-422-4453 (call, text or chat, 24/7). England and Wales: Coram Family Lives, 0808 800 2222 (free; weekdays 9am–9pm, weekends 10am–3pm). Scotland: Children First, 08000 28 22 33. Worried about a child's safety in the UK: NSPCC, 0808 800 5000 (weekdays 10am–4pm). If you're struggling yourself: 988 (US, call or text) or Samaritans, 116 123 (UK). Elsewhere: findahelpline.com.

If you live in two homes

A sorry does not need the other home's permission. Say it in yours, the same evening, in the same words. If you tell the other adult anything, tell them the shape: once you're calm, go back, name what you did, say sorry, then something warm together. Do not ask your child to carry the story between homes, and do not ask the other parent to confirm whether you are forgiven.

In the UK

The NHS has a plain page on anger and when to see a GP, and your health visitor is there for you as well as for your child. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children. For everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential; in Scotland, Children First, 08000 28 22 33. Worried about a child's safety: NSPCC, 0808 800 5000 (weekdays 10am–4pm). If anyone is in danger, call 999. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.