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

"I lost my temper with my five-year-old in front of everyone. What do I say now, and when?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Okay. Mistakes were made."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I used a big loud voice. That was my mistake. I'm sorry."

What you do next matters. The first sorry that comes out is often the office one, "mistakes were made," and a five-year-old hears a grown-up talking to nobody.

What is known, and at what age

No study we know of has tested a parent's apology to a five-year-old. The words on this page are everyday practice, built on pediatricians' guidance. The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents who have lost their temper to wait until they have cooled down, apologize to the child, and explain how they will handle it next time. Its policy statement describes yelling at or shaming a child as minimally effective in the short term and not effective in the long term.

The only experiment on parents' apologies we know of was with teenagers, average age sixteen to seventeen, who imagined their parent's reply after a real hurt. A plain sorry did better than a sorry with a "but" in it, and one plain sentence did as well as four. So for a five-year-old, take only the shape: short, owned, no "but."

What the words do

Take 2 has three short sentences. "I used a big loud voice" names what happened in words a five-year-old uses. "That was my mistake" is the owning. "I'm sorry" is the sorry. Then stop. Do not ask for a hug, a "that's okay," or a nice day now.

If your child turns away or cries, stay close and say, "I'm here. You're safe." If you add one more sentence, make it "Next time, I'll take a minute," and keep it.

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

Say the sorry where the shout happened, the same day if you can, and do not wait to hear what the other home would do. If you share anything with the other adult, share the shape: once you're calm, go back, own it, say sorry, then stop. A five-year-old should not be asked to report on either parent's temper to the other.

In the UK

The NHS page on anger says when to see a GP, and your GP is there for you as well as 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.