emoGlow · Scripts

After you snapped at your child · Ages 8–12

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

"I shouted at my nine-year-old over spilled juice and I've already said sorry six times. Why isn't it landing?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Sorry, sweetheart, I'm so sorry, I'm really sorry."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"I shouted on the train. The juice was an accident. I'm sorry."

Losing your temper happens, even to loving parents, and putting it right does not take six sorries.

What is known, and at what age

The only experiment on parents' apologies we know of is 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. One plain sentence did as well as four. And saying sorry did not seem to cost parents their authority. No study we know of has run the same test with nine-year-olds, so the words below are everyday practice in that shape: short, owned, no "but."

Pediatricians' general guidance, not tied to an age, is: wait until you have cooled down, apologize, and say how you will handle it next time.

What has been measured is how often parents shout, swear or call names. In one study of 976 two-parent US families with children aged 13–14, followed for a year, more of it was linked with more troublemaking and low mood, and being warm the rest of the time did not cancel that link. It is a link, not proof.

What the words do

Say the juice spilled on a crowded train and you shouted. Take 2 is three sentences. "I shouted on the train" names the act. "The juice was an accident" takes the blame off your child. "I'm sorry" is the sorry. Then stop.

Next time you hear your voice going up, say "I need a minute," and step away once your child is safe.

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 in the home where it happened, once, in the same words, and let it close there. If you tell the other adult anything, tell them the shape: short, own it, then stop. Never ask your child whether the other parent apologizes, and never compare.

In the UK

The NHS page on anger says when to see a GP about your own temper. 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.