

Repairing Harm Age 4 Summary

Why Repairing Harm?

By the age of four, children are keenly aware that they are their own individual people. They look for opportunities to do some things without the assistance of an adult. They also experience many feelings, including pride and rebellion, and are just beginning to understand how to express them. They will naturally test limits and break rules. This is a normal part of their development and necessary for their learning.

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Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input

- You can ask them about how they are feeling. Begin with the feeling word to help them build a feelings vocabulary. Keep your words short and to the point.
 - *"Frustrated. Are you frustrated?"*
 - *"Angry. Are you feeling angry?"*
 - *"Sad. I saw your friend leave you at the playground. Did that make you feel sad?"*
- You can also ask them how they think others might feel to begin teaching empathy.
 - *"Your sister cried when you said those unkind words to her. How might she be feeling?"*
 - *"When your friend didn't get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?"*
 - *"When you said that to me, how do you think that made me feel?"*

Trap: Avoid letting the question turn into an accusation. Remember to stay calm and that the goal of the question is to help the child uncover feelings.

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Teach New Skills

- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child acts inappropriately, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice that can replace the inappropriate behavior. This is a critical first step.
- At a calm time, ask, "What helps you feel better when you're sad, mad, or hurt?" Share ideas like taking deep breaths, getting a drink of water, taking a walk, or asking for a hug.

- Teach positive ways to ask for attention. It's easy to get into the habit of pointing out what children are not doing right. When children are behaving inappropriately to get attention, they have not yet learned how to get attention in positive ways. Consider how your child can seek your attention in acceptable ways. Then, actively teach these kinds of attention-getting behaviors. Would you like your child to say a polite "Excuse me" when they need you, and you're engaged in a conversation? If so, practice multiple times as a family. Do a dry run so that all are comfortable, and then reinforce that positive behavior to create more of the same.
- Brainstorm healthy coping strategies and make a list together to keep in an accessible location. These might include hugging a pillow, reading a favorite book, walking outside, getting a glass of water, or listening to music.
- Work on your family feelings vocabulary. Three-to-four-year-olds are in the early stages of understanding and communicating feelings. Notice and name feelings when a family member shows an expression to offer plenty of practice. Ask, don't tell. "Dad, you look sad. Is that right?" Being able to identify feelings is the first step in successfully managing them.
- Model assertive communication through "I-messages." Here's how: "I feel (insert feeling word) when you (name the words or actions that upset you) because (state the impact)." Here's an example: "I feel sad when you say hurtful things to your brother. It hurts his feelings." This helps you take responsibility for your feelings while avoiding blaming language like "You did..." (which closes down the mind and ears of the other). It helps communicate the problem constructively.
- Begin to teach your child how to repair harm. When they hurt a sibling's feelings, talk to them about what they could do to help heal the relationship, such as apologizing, doing an act of kindness for the other, drawing a picture, or offering a hug. However, avoid forced apologies. If your child is not ready to apologize, hear their feelings first. Once your child feels seen and heard, they will be more open to taking another's perspective and making repairs from a place of empathy.
- Model repairing harm. Some parents worry that apologizing for being too harsh may undermine their authority. All parents and all people make mistakes and say things they wish they hadn't. Coming to your child and apologizing models how to take accountability for your actions.
- End the day with love. When children misbehave during the day, they often end the day feeling bad about themselves. Children tie your love to their behavior. If you act proud of them, they feel loved. If you are disappointed or mad at them, they feel unloved. Be sure to spend one-on-one time with your child if they have had rough patches that day. This teaches them that they are loved no matter what choices they make. It encourages them to practice new ways of behaving.

Tip: When reflecting on your child's feelings, you can think about unpacking a suitcase. Frequently, layers of feelings need to be examined and understood, not just one. Anger might just be the top layer. You might ask about other layers after discovering why your child was angry. Was there hurt or a sense of rejection involved? Perhaps your child feels embarrassed? Fully unpacking the suitcase of feelings will help your child feel better understood by you as they become more self-aware.

Tip: Use children's books to help teach that difficult feelings like anger are normal and that there are healthy ways to deal with them. A good book is *When Sophie Gets Angry -- Really, Really Angry...* by Molly Bang and *Mouse Was Mad* by Linda Urban.

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Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Accept feelings. If you are going to help your child manage their biggest feelings, it is important to acknowledge and accept their feelings -- even ones you don't like. When your child is upset, consider your response. Instead of focusing on their actions or the problem, focus on their feelings FIRST. You could say, *"I hear you're upset. What can you do to help yourself feel better? Would your calm down space help you feel better?"* Then, focus on teaching and practicing better behavior.
- Use "Show me..." statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *"Show me how you can improve things with your sister."* This practice will prepare your child to use it.
- Offer limited and authentic choices. Even if small, offering them a choice—*"Do you want to talk to her or draw her a picture?"*—can return a sense of control to their lives and offer valuable practice in responsible decision-making.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like, *"I notice how you went back to your sister to talk to her and make things better after you got mad. That's how you make everyone feel better."*
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support in following through to repair it. They may need to hold your hand through that process, and that's okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

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Support Your Child's Development and Success

- Ask key questions to support their skills. For example, *"Your sister will be playing with the toy you love today. How can we practice taking turns?"*
- Learn about development. Each new age and stage will present differing challenges, including stress, frustration, and anger.
- Promote an "I can" belief. Children need to hear that you believe in their ability to mend their relationships.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can help offer additional support and motivation for your child when tough issues arise.

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Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice. For example, when children complete their homework on time, a short, specific call out is all that's needed: *"I notice you completed your homework today on your own in the time we agreed upon. Excellent."*
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, snuggle and read before bed after getting through your bedtime routine.

Trap: Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

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