



## Did You Say "Sorry?": Seeing Through Montessori Eyes

by Donna Brant Goertz

Upon entering a Montessori school, new staff members, parents, and children alike begin the slow process of assimilating into a new culture, a culture grown out of an understanding of the child's true nature. Within this culture we have elaborated anew each of the ordinary processes, rituals, customs, manners, and practices of daily life and learning to reflect Maria Montessori's vision of child development. In a Montessori school, we have strikingly different ways of handling what in a traditional school would be called lying, cheating, stealing, or bullying and their traditional aftermath, apologizing. For years it has been our challenge as Montessorians and parents of Montessori children to write about our culture, its practices, and their meanings so that all of us, adults and children alike, can clarify our thinking. Once clarity is achieved, we all endeavor mightily to maintain that clarity against the natural tendency to revert to the traditional thinking and behavior ingrained in us during childhood, both at home and at school.

### Taking a Fresh Look

Why do we not, on principle, describe a child as difficult or as a problem? Or lazy? Or defiant? Why do we not, on principle, pass judgment on children and dole out punishment? Why do we, on the contrary, think and rethink these subjects, read and write about them, and gather to discuss them? In this article, I will explore why we Montessorians don't require children to say they're sorry and what we do instead that is so much healthier for their emotional development. The underlying principles here are our deeply held trust in the life forces and primal urges that drive a child's development and our dedica-

tion to providing support and removing obstacles to her self-realization as an intelligent, creative, and caring human being. Maria Montessori taught us to recognize the innate developmental goodness of children and see that it is the environment, at home and at school, that prevents them from realizing that rightful goodness. We recognize that it is the responsibility of diligently

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The traditionally required "sorry" acts as a bandage, constricting sore emotions instead of airing and healing them.

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self-monitoring adults to provide a meticulously prepared environment and informed and loving relationships within which children can exercise choice, enjoy freedom, and thereby actualize their best selves. Such support is a child's basic need both at home and at school.

### What Do You Say, Billy?

Why do we never require a child to say "sorry," and what do we do instead? Why do we never even suggest it to a child, and what do we suggest instead? On the contrary, we strongly caution children not to apologize quickly and lightly, because an apology thus given usually leaps forth as a defensive way to avoid taking responsibility for one's own actions and others' feelings. Neither do we abandon our children by neglecting their social and emotional development.

A few years ago on the playground I walked past an adult, new to our school, who stood with two six-year-

old children in that typical stance an adult strikes when an aggrieved child and the "transgressor" face off and the adult awaits obedience to the command falsely posed as a question, "What do you say Billy?"

### What To Say Instead of "Sorry"

I spoke up quickly, saying, "Whatever you say right now, Billy, do not say 'sorry.' Wait an hour or a day to say 'sorry.' Saying 'sorry' is so important, no one should ever do it quickly or lightly or under pressure. For now you might say, 'I'm searching my heart for contrition,' or, 'I hope I can feel sorry soon,' or, 'I'm still so angry I can't even imagine ever being sorry.' You could say, 'I want to tell you all my angry feelings,' or, 'You're hurt. May I bring you an ice pack?' or, 'I'm sorry you're hurt, but I'm not yet sorry I hurt you.' You might say, 'I'm sad,' or, 'I'm scared,' or, 'I'm so angry I still don't even feel sorry you're hurt and that feels really bad.'"

### First Response: Emotional First Aid for Both

If the child who was hurt is still crying, I put my arms around them both and say, "Two really hurt children. What have they done to each other? One has hit and one has been hit. How can we help them feel better? Does either of you need an ice pack or a wet cloth? Would a drink of water help?" When children's fights are handled in this manner consistently, it is typical for both children to be crying afterward and for the one who did the hitting to be eager to care for the one she hit. This is because the child who has hit has not been taught to separate herself from the pain that led her to hit in the first place or from the shock of hurting someone. Her immediate and authentic

emotions remain undistorted and accessible. It is easy to help the children deal with this straightforward situation. Sorrow for causing pain is just beneath the surface in children who have not been scolded, blamed, or made to say sorry.<sup>1</sup>

When one child hits another child, who then begins to cry, it is common for the closest adult or even the closest child to turn to the one who did the hitting and scold him while at the same time comforting the child who is crying. Next, it is common for the adult to request an explanation from the two children and after hearing their cross-accusations, to hand down a judgment, solution, or sentence. Finally, the adult demands an apology from the child who hit, or even from both children to one another.

This form of adult intervention effectively separates the children from the original, authentic emotions that led to the hitting and from their emotional responses to hitting and being hit. This intervention blankets the primary emotions that are genuinely related

to the event, obscuring them with an unrelated series of emotions that result from the interaction with the adult. Instead of feeling his original anger and his subsequent distress at having hurt someone, the hitter is afraid of the adult's reaction, defensive of his own actions, justified that he has hurt another, angry that the other child is telling, and confused at the whole swirl of emotions.

In the early years, a child feels conflicted that he must say "sorry" when he doesn't feel it yet, but over time he begins to learn to tell that lie, "sorry," more readily and easily in order to spare himself the adult's judgment. Soon the child who hits develops a facility for feigning contrition and compassion and that false "sorry" becomes a habitual substitute for the real thing. Some children even go on to say "sorry" sarcastically; others say it with melodramatic pseudo-sincerity. All children who experience this traditional intervention lose connection with their core and displace their anger. Thus, the other, the

enemy, is born. Montessori has a lot to say about all this in her book *Education and Peace*. It is worth a careful reading.<sup>2</sup>

### **Staying With the Conflict Until It Is Resolved**

The more effective adult intervention is to comfort both children and hear the feelings of both, asserting all the while, with deeply held conviction, that it is not okay to hit and it is not okay to be hit. Both children are enlisted to plan strategies for handling conflicts better in the future so that no one gets hit and no one hits. Then, with this bottom line established, the two children are held accountable for figuring out a way to solve current individual problems without hitting or being hit.

### **Enlisting the Community to Invest in Solutions**

For chronic complaints about the same individual who hits often, help the children think in a new way. "What could we do so that she doesn't feel like hitting everyone? How can we tell when she is about to hit? How can we argue in a way that doesn't lead her to an

#### **STEP ONE**

Sit down together. Never begin problem solving while anyone is standing up. Comfort both children and wait until the worst of the crying or yelling is over. Remind the children that it's not okay to hit or to get hit. There are better ways to solve conflict, and we will work together to plan them. Give the children time to decide who will listen first.

#### **STEP TWO**

Prepare each child to listen to what happened from the other child's viewpoint, instructing each, "Get ready to listen to all he has to say before you speak, even if you disagree with what he's saying. Listen all the way through."

#### **STEP THREE**

Instruct each, "Prepare yourself to say all you have to say with strong but respectful words and a strong but respectful tone of voice, without repeating any part of it. Get ready to stop when you've had your say and listen to the other person with all your attention."

#### **STEP FOUR**

Support each child to restate what the other child said to him. "What did he say that you did that he didn't like? How did he say he felt?"

#### **STEP FIVE**

Support each child to listen to what the other child would like him to do instead next time.

#### **STEP SIX**

Support each child to say what he'd like the other child to do next time.

#### **STEP SEVEN**

Support each child to say what he could offer to do differently next time.

#### **STEP EIGHT**

Support each child to listen to what the other child offers to do differently next time.

#### **SUMMARY**

Help the children end the problem-solving session with a quick summary. "Tell him again what he did/said that you didn't like and what you would like him to do/say next time instead. Listen while he tells you again what you did/said that he didn't like and what he would like you to do/say next time instead. Tell him what you can offer to do or say differently next time. Listen while he tells you again what he can offer to do or say differently next time."

anger that becomes violent?" Inviting the community to share in the child's development helps them focus on their own role in these situations.

As for chronic complaints from another individual who gets hit often, help the children think in a new way: "How can he make his point strongly without getting hit? How can he get along with the children so they don't feel like hitting him? How can he get attention without annoying people?" It is important to enlist the help of the community because when they invest in helping the "victim" break out of his role, they become alert to their own part in the process.

### Helping the Individual to Step Out of a Role

To the child who has hit, you can say, "How can you express anger with respectful words? What can you say instead of calling names? How can you say what you feel without accusing or blaming someone else? What can you say to show strength without making physical threats?"

To the child who has been hit, you can say, "How can you be a person who doesn't get hit? How can you be a person who doesn't hit? You have a hidden power in your secret heart that knows how to do this. Speak to that power every night before you go to sleep and every morning when you wake up. Speak to that power when you are about to get yourself hit (or when you are about to hit someone)."

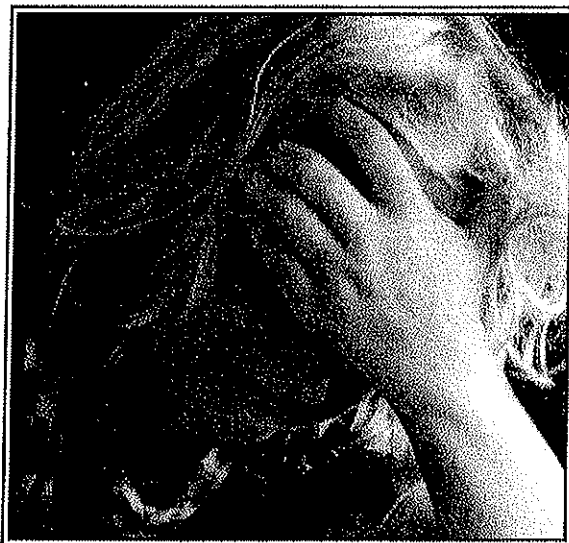
### Coming From the Heart

"When you feel like saying 'sorry' from your heart, go and say it." We encourage the children to enjoy the grace of a sincere apology. We acknowledge a child's spontaneous expression of contrition and share it with the community. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

One day Danny said, "I'm sorry I took your pencil and that you were looking for it for so long. I lost mine and I wanted to start writing my story right away. I saw you were sad and confused.

I'm really sorry."

I said, "Danny, that is the first time I've heard you volunteer a sincere apology.



Children, we have something big to celebrate. Danny is growing into saying 'sorry' from the heart." I am delighted to share Danny's development with the children. He has come such a long way. He knows it, too, and so does the community. Saying "sorry" is a celebration of healing one's self and seeking to heal an experience in a relationship. Saying "sorry" is a point of arrival, not a demanding point of departure up front. It is not a way to avoid an adult's ire, one's own responsibility, or the duty to make amends.

For the first year Danny was with us, we spent a lot of energy getting him to drop saying, "No, I didn't," when everyone saw him do something, and getting him to say, "I wish I hadn't," instead. Suddenly, this year he has developed by leaps and bounds so that he can not only experience deep remorse but also tell on himself when no one has even seen what he did. And he can offer a genuine apology as well. The long slow process has been worth the effort and time it has taken. Real social and emotional progress has been made, not just acquiescence to an adult command, as Montessori so eloquently and wisely describes in the stages of obedience. Commanding unthinking obedience and developing children to become adults

who obey blindly is horrifically dangerous, as history has repeatedly shown.<sup>3</sup>

### Modeling the Behavior We Seek

In a Montessori community, we adults apologize sincerely and freely to the children when we make a mistake or misunderstand and misjudge. In this way, we model apologizing for the children, knowing it to be the most potent way to lead them to do the same. When we forget to do something, must change a plan, or renegotiate a commitment, we apologize because we feel genuine regret. With elementary-age children, I make sure the children have models of many kinds of apologies from me, light-hearted ("Did you enjoy your tea, dearie? Really, Stan, sorry I left my tea cup on your table and in your way.

Thanks for not letting it get spilled."); silly and mildly self-deprecatory if I have taped a note to my lunch basket and still forgotten to bring what I said I would ("Maybe I should have taped it to my nose! Sorry, Ruth, I'll try to remember tomorrow"); or anguished if I have stepped on a foot ("Oh, Beth, that must have hurt like crazy. Are you all right?"); and an endless variety of others. Children are eager to model themselves after adults they love and respect, especially if those adults have a deep understanding of the children's nature, an endlessly hopeful confidence in their goodness, and a boundless appreciation for their worth.

We acknowledge the sincerity and deep feeling of children's apologies when they come as a point of arrival from the wellspring of their hearts. We stop children and call them to a higher plane when their apologies come from habit, fear, manipulation, control, or avoidance of responsibility. That's the time to stay with the conflict and work it through, leaving no room for a quick and insincere apology. That's the time to plant the seeds of an ability to apologize spontaneously and sincerely that will flower and bear fruit in the future.

1 Dr. Maria Montessori, *The Secret of Childhood*, trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, S. J. (New York: Ballentine Books, 1972). "Conventions which camouflage a man's true feelings are a spiritual lie which help him adapt himself to the organized deviations of society but which gradually change love into hatred. This is the terrible lie lurking in the deepest recesses of the subconscious."

2 Dr. Maria Montessori, *Education and Peace*, trans. Helen Lane (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1972). "The [traditional] obedience forced upon a child at home and in school, an obedience that does not recognize the rights of reason and justice, prepares the adult [he becomes] to resign himself to anything and everything. The widespread practice in [traditional] educational institutions of exposing a child who makes mistakes to public disapproval . . . instills in him an uncontrollable and irrational terror of public opinion, however unfair and erroneous that opinion may be. And through these and many other kinds of conditioning that lead to a sense of inferiority, the way is opened to the spirit of unthinking respect, and indeed almost mindless idolatry, in the minds of paralyzed adults toward public leaders. . . . And discipline thus becomes almost synonymous with slavery" (p. 20,21).

"Men educated in this [traditional] manner have not been prepared to seek truth and to make it an intimate part of their lives, nor to be charitable toward others and to cooperate with them to create a better life for all. On the contrary, the [traditional] education they have received has prepared them for what can be considered only an interlude in the real collective life—war.

"If man were to grow up fully and with a sound psyche, developing a strong character and a clear mind, he would be unable to tolerate the existence of diametrically opposed moral principles within himself or to advocate simultaneously two sorts of justice, one that fosters life and one that destroys it. He would not simultaneously cultivate two moral powers in his heart. Nor would he erect two disciplines: one that marshals human energies to build, another that marshals them to destroy what has been built. A strong man cannot stand a split in his consciousness, much less act in two opposite ways" (*ibid.*, p. 21,22).

3 Dr. Maria Montessori, "On Discipline-Reflections and Advice," *The Call of Education* 1, nos. 3-4 (1924), [www.montessori-ami.org](http://www.montessori-ami.org). "Free choice is a higher activity: only the child who knows what he needs to exercise and develop his spiritual life can really choose freely. One cannot speak of free choice when every external object calls the child equally, and the child, lacking in directing willpower, follows everything and passes from one thing to another without end. This is one of the most important distinctions which the teacher should be able to make. The child who does not yet obey an internal guide is not the free child entering upon the long and narrow way of perfection. He is still the slave of superficial sensations, which make him the sport of his environment; his spirit is tossed between one object and another, like a ball. The man is born when the soul feels itself; fixes, orientates itself and chooses. "This is the period in which discipline establishes itself: a form of active peace, of obedience and love, in which work perfects itself and multiplies, just as in springtime the flowers take on color, leading on to the production of sweet and refreshing fruits."

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DONNA BRYANT GOERTZ, 0 TO 3, PRIMARY, AND ELEMENTARY TRAINED, FOUNDED AUSTIN MONTESSORI SCHOOL IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, IN 1967, WHICH SHE DIRECTS TO DATE. FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS, SHE GUIDED CLASSES OF THIRTY-FIVE CHILDREN FROM 6 TO 9 YEARS OF AGE. CURRENTLY, SHE DEDICATES HERSELF TO STAFF DEVELOPMENT, PARENT EDUCATION, AND NEW PROGRAMS INITIATIVES. GOERTZ WRITES FOR JOURNALS AND LECTURES INTERNATIONALLY ON THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, CHARACTER, AND VALUES DEVELOPMENT IN THE MONTESSORI CLASSROOM AS RELATED TO MONTESSORI'S EDUCATION FOR PEACE. HER BOOK, *CHILDREN WHO ARE NOT YET PEACEFUL: PREVENTING EXCLUSION IN THE EARLY ELEMENTARY CLASSROOM* HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO SPANISH AND AWAITS ITS CHINESE TRANSLATION. IT IS USED IN EDUCATION CIRCLES AROUND THE WORLD.

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