

How to Apologize to Your Kids

Everyone snaps sometimes — it's what you do after that counts.

By **Jessica Grose**
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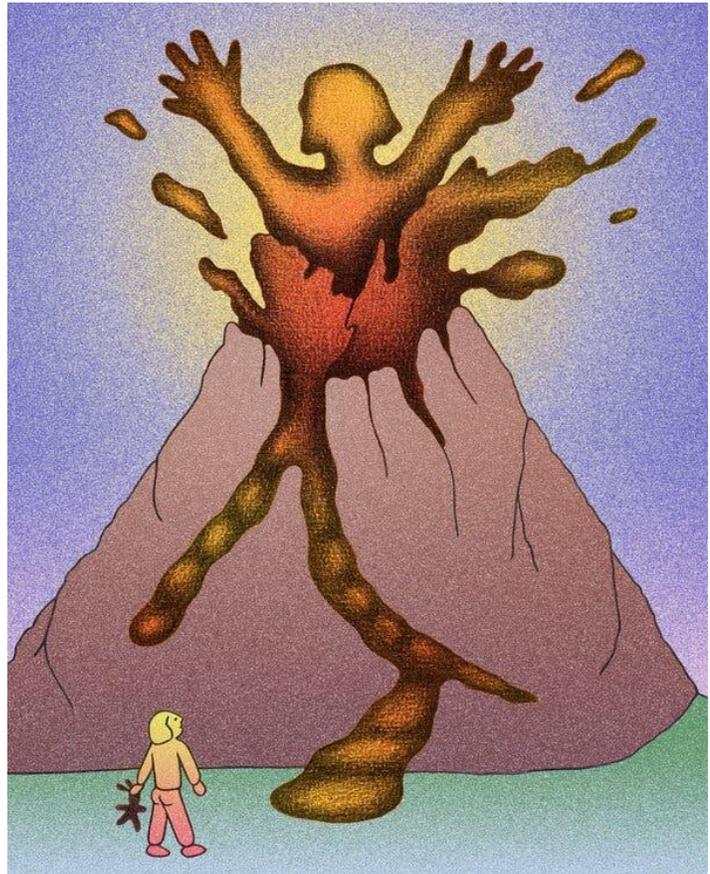
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A year into working from my bedroom, I thought I had reached an emotional equilibrium where I could tolerate the multiple kid interruptions throughout my day. But last week, my older daughter was assigned a scavenger hunt in remote school. She barged through my door — which I am sorry to report has no lock — four times in one hour, looking for slippers, something red (twice) and a hairbrush. On the fourth interruption, I snapped. “You’ve got to get out of here,” I said, in a voice much harsher than I like to use with my children.

My daughter was upset, and I felt bad that I yelled. But I was also conflicted. Every time she came in, I had politely asked her to look elsewhere in the apartment because I had a deadline to meet. She’s a third-grader, which is old enough to understand and honor that request, and I want to raise her to be empathetic to other people’s needs.

How do I walk that line between showing my children that I have feelings that aren’t always positive, but not letting my irritation erupt, uncontrolled?

The first thing to know is that “all parents snap at their children,” said Dr. Pooja Lakshmin, a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry at George Washington University School of Medicine, and doing so from time to time doesn’t make you a good parent or a bad one. It’s just a fact of life. Dr. Lakshmin made clear that she’s not talking about [emotional abuse](#) or physical violence, which are never acceptable. Emotional abuse may include ridiculing a child, constant criticism or withholding affection or comfort.



But raising your voice or losing your cool from time to time? That's inevitable because we are human. "There is this kind of expectation that children should be protected from feeling any negative emotion," said Jennie Hudson, a professor of clinical psychology at the University of New South Wales in Australia. "But that's toxic positivity. It's not normal; it's not OK. We have a range of emotions that include feeling frustrated, anxious and worried." It's also worth noting that the pandemic is exacerbating a lot of stressors on parents, both financial and emotional. And even as things improve, virus-wise, many of us are under additional strain.

The most important thing is what happens *after* you snap at your children, said all four of the experts I spoke to. Here's their advice for coming back from saying things you regret, how to empathize with your kids and how to cut down on snapping when it's possible.

Acknowledge your mistake. After you've calmed down, apologize to your child, and talk to them in an age-appropriate way about your feelings, Dr. Hudson said. You don't have to go into the details of why you reacted the way you did, but you can say something like: "I'm sorry I yelled. I got frustrated, but it's not your fault I lost my cool. Here's how I could have handled it better." Then you can talk about ways to calm down that you could have used, like going for a walk, taking a deep breath or walking away from the discussion. "It's a learning opportunity for a child," Dr. Hudson said.

Give yourself a time out. They aren't just for kids; they're for grown-ups, too, said Dr. Alexandra Sacks, a reproductive psychiatrist based in New York. "If you're so overwhelmed that you can't think about what is developmentally appropriate, give yourself a time out," Dr. Sacks said.

While it's not always possible, especially if your child is so young they can't be left alone and you're the only parent in the situation, try to give yourself that space to call a friend or scream into a pillow if you're feeling emotionally overwhelmed.

"When parents have too-high bars for perfection and flawlessness, they feel they can't walk out of the room, or give the kid five more minutes of screen time," even if it would help the parent calm down, Dr. Sacks said. Don't fall [into this martyr trap](#).

Remember that kids struggle with impulse control. In my situation, even though my daughter is 8, she's still got a developing brain, and knowing that I'm on the other side of the closed door is just too enticing for her. Dr. Sacks suggested putting a sign on the door when I really don't want my kids to come in, as a visual cue that might remind them to stop, and help them resist opening it.

Dr. Alexa Mises Malchuk, a family physician and assistant professor at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine, said that a timer could also help my daughter. If she's finding it irresistible to interrupt, I can set a timer for 30 minutes that can help her delay entering my room, at which point the urge might pass.

If your snapping is frequent, try to get help. With the caveat that there are so many situations in which this is not possible, if you find yourself irritable all the time and lashing out at your kids frequently, and these emotions are a marked change for you, you “need support or relief,” Dr. Sacks said. That additional support could mean extra child care, or seeing a therapist.

On the evening of the scavenger hunt, when I talked to my daughter after dinner about losing my temper, she was understanding, especially because I put it in terms she could empathize with. I said, “It’s like how you feel when your little sister interrupts you during your school day” — an event that happens a few times a week and causes my older daughter to absolutely uncork on her sibling.

I apologized to my kid, and I think we both felt better after. But I’m still planning to invest in a lock for my bedroom door.