

6. Managing a request for an apology

The following tips will help you manage a request for an apology.

Parents who make a complaint may ask for an apology. If both parties recognise each other's rights and responsibilities and want a 'win-win' outcome, an apology alone may resolve the complaint. Where it does not, it can reduce tension and pave the way for maintaining and repairing relationships. However, if the apology is given in a way that results in the recipient seeing it as a defeat, the apology can backfire and escalate a conflict.

What to ask yourself

- What specifically is the parent seeking the apology for? For example, are they asking me to apologise for the actions of someone else or for something that I did?
- Is our relationship too adversarial or the differences too great for the person to accept my apology as sincere?
- Is the liability too great for me to offer an apology?
- Would an apology be more beneficial at some future time and after a process of dispute resolution?
- Would apologising at this stage be too personally humiliating for me?
- Will the other person accept the apology with good grace?
- Should I ask someone else to apologise on my behalf?
- Will the other person interpret the apology as a sign of weakness, defeat and admission of total responsibility and try to use it to win over me, rather than us winning together?

Features of an effective apology

- A specific statement of the action or inaction that both parties agree led to the request for an apology. For example, 'We agree that I didn't take into account the views of ...'.
- An acknowledgement by the person making the apology of their responsibility and accountability. For example, 'I now recognise that I should have...'
- An acknowledgement of the motivation of the person asking for the apology, which does not necessarily name the motivation nor imply that the motivation is typical, mature or appropriate. The acknowledgement can just state the fact that the motivation existed. For example, 'I now know that receiving a prompt reply is important to you'.
- A direct self-judgement. Saying things like, 'I was insensitive' or 'What I did was wrong' can help to establish common ground with the person receiving the apology.
- A statement of regret, such as 'I am sorry'. This indicates that the person making the apology takes responsibility for having acted wrongly or for hurting the other person.
- An explanation of why the person making the apology did what they did. The explanation must not intend to be (or sound) self-serving and must not blame another person. For example, 'I was very concerned about the student's welfare' presents a point of view that everyone can share.

Making the apology

- Match how the apology is communicated (for example, the body language and tone of voice used) in the message.
- If you are likely to interact with the other person in future, you both should discuss how to prevent conflict from arising in future and how any future conflict will be handled.