

Why Repair Matters More Than Perfect Parenting

~ Saheli Sheth (Peoria, USA)

"I'm sorry." My mom stood uneasily in the doorway of my room with my diary in her hands. In it were the stories and secrets that I, 13 years old at the time, had poured into it. She looked at me sincerely and continued, "I'm so sorry that I read your diary. I saw it while cleaning and became curious, but I shouldn't have done that." Before leaving the room, she praised my writing and gently pointed out the strengths in what she had read.

As I sat there alone, I expected to feel violated, or mad at the very least, but I didn't. **What my mother had beautifully done is something called "repair"**¹: she repaired her relationship with me. She knew she had done something hurtful and admitted that it was wrong. **In doing so, she gave me a healthy blueprint for what was okay and not okay in how I should be treated.** Although she was an adult and I was just a child, my mom was the first adult I remember who ever apologized to me.

We may have grown up with the teaching that parents and elders are always right. And while there are virtues to this value system, **our gurus are a prime example of staying humble, regardless of their greatness.** Our gurus teach us these values by folding their hands or saying, "Forgive us for any mistakes." They bow down to any devotee, even those younger than them. This humility is one of the many reasons why their presence feels so safe. When adults own their mistakes, they encourage children to feel safe coming to them when *they* make mistakes, too.

But showing this humility in real life can be so hard! Because of our human ego, it may be difficult to acknowledge that our actions sometimes hurt our kids. Yet if we, as parents, challenge our egos and practice humility in action, then our children will learn to do the same.

This idea is echoed by psychologist Dr. Becky Kennedy in her must-watch TED Talk called "The Single Most Important Parenting Strategy." Her message is simple: **"Get good at repair."** She defines **"repair"** as taking ownership of our actions and acknowledging how they may have hurt someone. She emphasizes that repair is *more* than just apologizing.

¹Repair is for moments when we objectively do something hurtful, such as taking our stress out on our kids or calling them negative words. In some situations, parents will need to set rules or limits that may upset the child; this is part of effective parenting and teaches them discipline, so repair does not apply.

A GOOD REPAIR

✗ What not to do	✓ What to do instead
Focus on our own feelings → "I feel so bad, I'm so sorry!"	Focus on our kids' feelings → "I'm sorry I yelled. That might have been scary for you. "
Focus on how our child's actions caused our reaction → "If you had just listened to me, I wouldn't have gotten mad at you."	Take ownership of our own actions → "I realize now that I overreacted, and I should have stayed calm and listened to your side of the story."

An example of when repair becomes essential is after yelling at a child. Most parents at some point will yell at their kids; it happens. **What's most important is what happens *after* yelling.** That's where repair comes in.

The first step in repairing is to be kind to ourselves. This could be as simple as saying, "Wow, I was really overwhelmed. Mistakes happen." When we extend kindness to ourselves first, we're better able to offer that same compassion to our kids and move forward in taking ownership of our actions.

When parents and caregivers make repairs, kids are able to stop blaming themselves. If a parent *doesn't* acknowledge the harm caused, **a child often turns that pain inward:** "I messed up and got yelled at. I keep doing everything wrong." ***But when a parent steps in and takes ownership, the child is able to release their self-blame.***

By practicing repair, you are first giving grace to the God within you, and then humbly mending your relationship with the God within your child.

Here are a few gentle questions that parents can reflect on or discuss:

1. *Can you think of a time when a parent or elder acknowledged their mistake or apologized to you, whether through words or through actions, like showing love and care? How did that impact your relationship with them?*
2. *Reflecting on your childhood, how did you feel if an elder yelled at you? What would have made that experience better for you?*
3. *How can parents model humility in daily life?* ◆