

WHY DO WE APOLOGIZE?

Revolutionary Common Sense
by Kathie Snow

Whether we realize it or not, we do a lot of apologizing on behalf of people with disabilities, and many individuals who have disabilities apologize for themselves on a regular basis. Whether these apologies come in the form of excuses, explanations, or regret, they're unnecessary, at best, and harmful, at worst.

During the first few times my friend, Tom, and I were together, he routinely said, "I'm sorry," numerous times. When we left a room, I held the door for him. As he wheeled through, he looked up and said, "I'm sorry." When he dropped something on the floor and I retrieved it for him, he threw out another, "I'm sorry."

Why did he do this? After I got to know him a little better, I asked him, and his response stunned me! "Ever since I was little," he said, "I've needed a lot of help from other people. No one ever said anything to me about this, but I always felt that my needing help was a bother to others—like when they had to stop what they were doing to help me. I apologize because I'm sorry I'm a burden to other people."

I was astounded! I ranted, with great love and emotion, that a friend helping a friend is never a bother or a burden! He mumbled something indistinct and I raved on. I told him that when I had my arms full of packages and someone (even a stranger) opened a door for me, I didn't apologize or think of myself as a bother. I simply said, "Thank you."

Tom had never thought of things that way. For whatever reasons, his vision was skewed. Until our conversation, I don't think Tom had ever considered that the help he received from friends—or even strangers—was no different than the informal as-

sistance people *without* disabilities give to each other day in and day out. After our conversation, Tom agreed he would work hard to replace "I'm sorry" with "Thank you," when someone gives him a hand with something.

Many parents also apologize for their kids with disabilities, although they may not use the words, "I'm sorry" or "I apologize." For example, when four-year-old Micah, who has autism, goes ballistic in the grocery store check out lane, his mom, Marie, turns to the nearby gawkers and says, "He has autism," as a way to explain her son's behavior. (Many parents have admitted, however, that they're really trying to protect their own images, by letting others know what their children's behavior was not the result of "bad parenting.")

When I speak about this subject at conferences, I ask the following: "Has anyone ever seen a four-year-old child who *doesn't* have a disability label go ballistic in the grocery store check out lane?" Most people laugh and agree they have. I then ask if the mother "explains" the child's behavior

by announcing to the gawkers, "He takes after his father!" In general, this doesn't happen. Why? *Because it's nobody's business!* Parents of kids who *don't* have disabilities don't feel compelled to explain about their children's looks, behavior, or anything else. They don't feel the need to apologize. The same can and should be true for parents of children who have disability labels.

But some parents disagree with this. They feel it's beneficial to educate grocery store patrons (or others) about their child's condition. I agree that, if one has the time and the energy, it can be helpful to educate

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• *Uncalled-for excuses are* •
• *practical confessions.* •
• Charles Simmons •
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others about the “condition,” but never about the child! What must it make a child feel like when his mother talks about him like he’s not there? And how many times has this already occurred in his life? *We must protect a child’s privacy and dignity.*

So if the child is not present, and *if* the parent has the time and energy to do a mini-lecture, she can go for it. When this is not possible, or if this isn’t something a parent wants to do, she can use humor to elevate herself and her child above a sticky situation. (See the “Humor to the Rescue” article.)

Professionals apologize in various ways, as well, resulting in unintended and negative consequences. For example, when an employment counselor (Fred) is attempting to secure a job for a Matt (a person with a disability), he may inadvertently sabotage his efforts with a word here, a tone of voice there, or body language that is apologetic in nature. “Yes, Matt can do [this or that], but no, [*big, heaving sigh accompanied by shoulder shrug and shaking of head*] he’s still struggling with [whatever.]”

Instead of using words and body language that make Matt look pitiful or unworthy (and which slam the door on his chances at the job), Fred can reframe and rephrase his message to something like, “Yes, Matt can do [this or that] and [*proud look and enthusiastic tone of voice*] he’s getting closer to being able to [do whatever].” Some may think this difference to be so slight that it wouldn’t matter. But a seemingly minor change in communication (words, tone of voice, body language) can present an entirely different picture.

One of my son’s elementary teachers had great skill with language. Some teachers describe children who haven’t yet mastered reading as “non-readers,” “slow readers,” or something similar. Mrs. Myers described them as “emerging readers.” The skills were *emerging!* Is the glass half-empty or half-full?

After I spoke on this subject at a recent workshop, David, the father of a four-year-old daughter who had Down syndrome approached me. “I have a confession to make,” he said. “People come up to my daughter and me in grocery stores, malls, and other places and say, ‘Oh, your daughter is so cute!’ And she really is—we’re so proud of her. But when people say that, I answer, ‘Thanks, but she has Down Syndrome.’ *I don’t know why I do that!* I guess I’m apologizing for her disability and I shouldn’t!”

David was quiet and thoughtful for a moment, then added, “I guess it wouldn’t be much different than if someone told me I really had a great mom, and I said, ‘Yeah, but she has a lot of flatulence!’ That wouldn’t be right, so what I’ve been doing to my precious daughter isn’t right either! I’m not going to do it anymore. When someone says my daughter is cute, I’ll just proudly say, ‘Thank you!’ No more apologizing!”

With a furrowed brow, David then expressed concern about what affect his past actions and words might have on his daughter. My suggestion was to talk to her about it, apologize (this is the time when an apology *is* appropriate), and assure her it won’t happen again. I feel it’s important to own up to our errors. Others will forgive us and help us do better.

If we spend time thinking about our words and actions, we may discover a variety of ways in which we apologize or make excuses for people with disabilities—even without saying “I apologize” or “I’m sorry.” If we’re determined, we can find ways to reframe our communication to eliminate apologist explanations and ensure we’re promoting positive images. It’s important to do this if we’re going to change societal attitudes. It’s even more important, however, for the self-esteem of the person with a disability label. Seeing people with disabilities as individuals who are our equals, and who are entitled to common respect and dignity means never having to say, “I’m sorry.”

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