

INSIGHT | RELATIONSHIPS

Repair is Not Saying Sorry

Forcing an apology before a child understands what happened teaches compliance, not empathy. What genuine repair looks like — and the script that makes it repeatable.

McArthur Early Childhood Education | The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF | Edition 03

"Say sorry." The child says sorry. Nothing changes. The interaction is closed, the learning is missed, and the hurt child has received a word without meaning behind it. Repair is not a forced apology. It is restoring safety, relationship, and skill.

The repair sequence

1. Name the impact simply: "That push hurt. [Child] needed space and care."
2. Offer a repair choice: bring a tissue, help rebuild, draw a picture, check if the other child is okay — but only when the other child is ready.
3. Teach the next words: "Stop. I don't like it." "My turn next." "Can I have space?"
4. Keep it brief. Practise once. Help the child return to the group with support.
5. Document the follow-up: what repair was offered, what support was needed, what plan should be used next time.

TIMING MATTERS

Repair happens after regulation, not during escalation. The child must be calm enough to understand impact and choose a repair action. Forcing repair in the peak teaches rejection, not responsibility.

What repair is not

- Forcing "sorry" before the child understands what happened.
- Demanding eye contact.
- Public correction in front of peers.
- "Come back when you are good" — that teaches isolation, not regulation.

What repair teaches

When repair is done well, the child learns three things: actions have impact, I can make it better, and the adult will help me. That is the foundation of empathy — and it is built through practice, not through the word "sorry."

This article is part of The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF — M^cArthur's editorial series for the early childhood education sector. For the full whitepaper and webinar replay, visit www.mcarthur.com.au/insights.