

# Understanding Reparation

## **Therapeutic Reparation for Youth with Problematic Sexual Behaviors Part 1 of 6**

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The idea of restorative justice and restitution has long been a part of probation protocols or requirements for youth who have illegal sexual behavior. Almost all programs ask a youth to write clarification/apology letters to caregivers or the child they abused. When working with young people who have sexually harmed, this process can be even more therapeutic. Especially in the case of sibling sexual abuse; the children involved in the sexual abuse will likely be living together again. In almost all cases, an apology letter is helpful to everyone involved. If possible, the youth who caused the harm also completes a “reparation project” which can restore a sense of balance in the family. The reparation project gives the child or teen with PSB (Problematic Sexual Behavior) something to be proud of; they cannot be proud of the illegal behavior, but they can be proud of their efforts to repair their mistake.

### *Reparation is Hope for the Future*

I recommend that the concept of Reparation be introduced at the very beginning of treatment to both children and all caregivers; a thing to hope for....REPAIR. An underlying principle of treatment for youth with PSB (Problematic Sexual Behavior) is to acknowledge the harm and provide hope. Reparation is meant to demonstrate this concept in a concrete way. The emphasis is on providing a benefit to the child who was abused and that other parties’ benefit is secondary. The goals of reparation, in order of importance are:

- a. Healing for the child who was abused, helping to repair their wounds.
- b. Partially restore the balance in the family system or other systems which were negatively impacted by the sexual harm, for example, neighborhoods, schools, religious organizations.
- c. Create a positive environment in the family and, if appropriate, encourage the rebuilding of the relationship between the children or youth involved.
- d. Reduce shame in the child who caused sexual harm...see River of Shame illustration.
- e. Give providers hope that change is possible...see Ripple Effect illustration.
- f. Provide a concrete way for the youth to prove that they are genuinely remorseful for their illegal sexual harm.
- g. Give the youth with PSB something to be proud of. They cannot be proud of the illegal or harmful sexual behavior, but they can be proud of their efforts to repair their mistake.

### *Apologies and Forgiveness*

In the book, the 5 Apology Languages by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas, they identify 5 ways to apologize. The 5 ways are expressing regret, accepting responsibility, making restitution, genuinely repenting and requesting forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness is generally not appropriate in instances of sexual abuse. Asking for forgiveness may trivialize the seriousness of the harmful acts and it is NOT part of reparation or restitution for youth with PSB (Problematic Sexual Behavior). Sometimes people think they want “forgiveness” so they can “just forget the whole thing happened”. True forgiveness is offered naturally by the child who was abused as a part of their healing process. It is more appropriate if the youth with PSB can express hopes and wishes of a positive (non-sexual) relationship in the future. The bottom line is that in the reparation process, forgiveness is not included, but the other 4 types of apology languages are all necessary.

### *The Team Lead*

A human services provider on the team takes a leadership position in making sure the reparation is completed. The therapist involved in supporting the youth with sexual harm is usually in the best position to provide a leadership role to complete the reparation project. The collaboration process begins with releases signed and contact between the therapists for all children involved or a case manager who may mediate the process later. Many abused children have flashbacks or regressive behaviors after hearing from or seeing the young person who abused them. Reparation activities are NOT done with an abused child if their emotional needs are unknown or they don't have a supportive professional to help them with this process and make sense of the concept. Initially, the goal for reparation should be to include both letters of accountability (apology) and doing something concrete (reparation project) as a way to make restitution and cover all 4 types of apology languages (expressing regret, accepting responsibility, making restitution and genuinely repenting).

### *Initial Letter of Apology*

As soon as possible, the child who was abused, and their therapist, is informed that the child who committed the sexual assault is in treatment which will lead to this young person taking accountability. The youth with PSB is then encouraged to write an “initial letter of apology or accountability” during the first 6 sessions. Something very brief, perhaps 1 -3 sentences in which the youth with PSB makes positive statements to the child they abused. If appropriate, they can provide this letter or statement to a caregiver or the youth they harmed, or alternately, they can write this letter to their own therapist or their past self which was responsible for the problematic sexual behavior. This initial step provides a launching pad for a positive cycle of feeling proud for taking responsibility and provides hope that the reparation process is possible. Simple statements include, “I'm glad the secret is out”, “I hope you are

OK”, “I wish it hadn’t happened”. It is not expected, that the youth take full responsibility at this point in treatment. But, if the youth has an ability to take steps toward accountability and acknowledgement of harm, this is certainly praised and may be included in the initial letter. If the youth is still in complete denial of any inappropriate events, please refer to Part 2 titled “Helping a Youth Take Accountability”.

### *Reparation Delivery Options*

If the child who was abused is not available, a reparation activity could be presented to other positive adults such as forensic case workers, clergy, grandparents, probation officers, law enforcement, and therapist for the abused child. Delivery of reparation may be done in writing, in person, or in joint sessions with therapists. Examples of ways to complete reparation include:

- Letter writing back and forth via therapists to answer questions or share information between parties who might not be ready for face to face contact
- Family sessions co-led by therapist of youth with PSB and therapist of youth who was sexually harmed
- Apology letters (see part 5)
- Reparation projects (see part 6)

### *Anchor the Memory*

The reparation activities are documented with photos and a written story about the process. Both the abused youth and the youth with PSB should process the meaning of reparation activities as it relates to themselves and their family. All letters of accountability should have copies kept in the client’s file, probation officers’ file and in a safe place with other important papers at home. The documentation taken during these events will be helpful in the future as everyone grows and the memory of this positivity fades. If the actual abusive events occurred at younger ages, include photos of the children at the age they were at the time of the abuse. This is especially critical when a youth commits the harmful acts before puberty, but reparation happens after puberty. “Anchor the memory” so that in the future, all parties will remember that the sexual abuse involved children or teens and not adults who have fully functioning brains.

### *What’s the next step?*

After reparation is completed, and the difficult work has been done; a celebration is deserved. Therapists should collaborate with each other and with other members of the Multi-Disciplinary Team after reparation activities and decide what the next steps should be. The team can then decide about more contact, visits or reunification. Some caregivers are very anxious to have their children reunited after sibling sexual abuse and decisions should be made in a timely

manner. Hopefully, other family members and providers will witness the positivity from reparation, which widens the ripple effect. And last, but not least, the family (and providers) deserve a celebratory cake, or other special treat.

*There is a NEW normal*

Therapy is not over however, the family still has to prepare for the future and attend follow up sessions. Thoughts and feelings may arise at this time that were not present or anticipated. Everyone in the family needs to be very clear that reparation does NOT mean that everything “goes back to normal”. The caregivers should be prepared to help either child remember the positive outcome of treatment and reparation if and when the abusive dynamics or “leftover baggage” reappear in the future. Talk with the whole family about how to reenter treatment if needed. There will be a NEW normal in the family. This includes maintaining supervision between siblings involved in sexual abuse. They cannot be alone together until the youngest child is 18. Period. In the NEW normal, the family remembers that there was harm in the form of sexual abuse and that the family has *overcome* the harm. All family members can be proud of their part in creating a new type of family; free from sexual (and physical or emotional) abuse.

Additional resources and articles that are intended to accompany this article available on [www.sheryloverby.com](http://www.sheryloverby.com)

- Part 2 Helping Youth take Accountability
- Part 3 Accountability Family Session
- Part 4 Caregiver Letter of Praise and Support
- Part 5 Apology Letters
- Part 6 The Reparation Project

**Sources:**

1. 5 apology languages book by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas
2. A Collaborative Approach For Family Reconciliation And Reunification With Youth Who Have Caused Sexual Harm by Joann Schladale MS LMFT  
<http://resourcesforresolvingviolence.com/publication3.pdf>
3. [NCSBY website, section on reunification. http://www.ncsby.org/content/reunification](http://www.ncsby.org/content/reunification)
4. OU Health and Sciences Center, CBT-PSB training, helping caregivers write letters of support and encouragement, Carrie Swisher and Jane Silvosky.
5. Considering Family Reconnection and Reunification after Child Sexual Abuse: A Road Map for Advocates and Service Providers. <https://www.nsvrc.org/publications/nsvrc-publications-guides/considering-family-reconnection-and-reunification-after-child>