

Apology Letters

Therapeutic Reparation for Youth with Problematic Sexual Behaviors Part 5 of 6

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Writing an apology letter is one of the ways for a youth with Problematic Sexual Behavior to make amends and send positive messages to the child they have harmed in order to repair their mistake. An initial letter of accountability may have been done in the introductory phase of treatment (see Part 1 Understanding Reparation), however a more detailed letter is needed to finish accountability. To make it easier for a youth with PSB to choose what to say, I put statements on individual cards (*I Was Wrong Cards*) that the youth can sort and then choose which ones to recopy into a letter. The letter should include items that are the most relevant to the child who was abused. Sometimes, more than one letter is needed so it is not overwhelming by having too many messages in one letter. A good rule of thumb is that a letter should contain the same number of sentences as the receiving child's age, so a 5 year old child receives a letter with 5 sentences, and 10 year old child, receives one with 10 sentences. Make sure the letters are appropriate for the age and emotional state of the child receiving them in terms of developmentally appropriate language and sparse details of the abusive acts. It is ok to write several drafts of a letter that are completed at different phases of treatment which may or may not be given to the other child.

The book by Gary Chapman and Jennifer Thomas "Apology Languages" is very helpful in understanding how to make apologies meaningful. A Letter can express the 4 types of apology languages (omitting asking for forgiveness) in the letters: expressing regret by saying "I apologize" or "I regret what I did"; accepting responsibility with "I was wrong"; making restitution by asking "what can I do to make it right"; and genuinely repenting for example, "I'll try not to do that again".

If the child is old enough, it will be important for the youth with PSB to include three or four other positive messages in writing that will help the youth who was sexually abused, they might say:

- a. You did nothing to deserve the abuse or to be hurt by me
- b. You are not at fault for the abuse
- c. I am relieved that people found out about the abuse
- d. I am not angry with you for telling the truth
- e. If anyone hurts you in the future, I hope you tell someone

- f. I hope you will have a positive and bright future
- g. I am glad that we got the help we needed.

Personal touch

It is advisable to have the other child's therapist provide feedback on what should be included and what should be left out of the letter. Letters should be handwritten if possible. Spelling and grammatical errors should be left IN the letter to make it more original. This will serve as a reminder later that the youth with PSB was not an adult. If the child who was abused is pre reading age, drawing pictures to go with simple language may be more helpful. Having hand written letters will also make the reparation activity feel more real and genuine. Please avoid providing "write in the blank" letters, or letters edited by the therapist, these are questionable and may not truly reflect the thoughts of the youth with PSB. After choosing cards (from the **I Was Wrong Cards** deck) that express what they would like to say, the youth tweaks the phrasing so it sounds like something they would actually say. Finally, include the date, a personal and official (cursive) "signature" and a salutation such as "yours truly", "good luck", or "thanks for listening". Even if the other child may never want to receive a letter, the youth should write one anyway and provide information to the abused child on how to find the letter in the future. It is possible that the other child or their caregivers will change their mind when the abused child enters a new developmental phase.

A word of caution

One must use good judgment if the letter is directly provided to another youth or family without sufficient context or preparation. It has only happened one time, but an apology letter was posted on Facebook and used as way to "prove" the youth with PSB was a threat to the community since they admitted to sexual behavior in their apology letter. This is emotionally harmful to all parties involved and may not have happened if the abused child's caregivers had more support or another way to "vent" their feelings. I ALWAYS keep copies of apology letters in my clinical files and encourage the family of the youth with PSB to keep the apology letter in a safe and secure place so it can be helpful in the future. Refer to the Part 1 called "Understanding Reparation" for more details on the dos and don'ts of delivering reparation activities, including apology letters.

The Caregiver Letter

Caregivers can clearly define their emotional support by writing a letter to the youth with PSB. Many caregivers need to clarify that they are supportive in spite of their first reactions to the news or disclosure of PSB. More information can be found in Part 4 "Caregiver Letter of Praise and Support" on www.sheryloverby.com.

Additional resources and articles that are intended to accompany this article available on www.sheryloverby.com

- Part 1 Understanding Reparation
- Part 2 Helping Youth take Accountability
- Part 3 Accountability Family Session
- Part 4 Caregiver Letter of Praise and Support
- 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>