

Five-year-olds monitor the common ground between victims and apologetic transgressors

Apologies play a central role in repairing social relationships; they communicate regret (Leary, 1996), concern for the victim (Schleien et al., 2010), and a willingness to make amends (Schlenker, 1980). During the preschool period, children thus often respond positively to others' apologetic displays (e.g., Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2019; Smith & Harris, 2012). However, apologies do not uniformly succeed. In many social exchanges, simply saying "sorry" is insufficient unless it is accompanied by information that clarifies why the transgression occurred (Waddington et al., 2022, 2023). Despite growing evidence that children can distinguish more from less effective apologies, it remains unclear how they determine when additional explanation is required.

One candidate mechanism is children's sensitivity to common ground—the information mutually shared between social partners. From this perspective, reasons following harm only become necessary when mitigating facts—such as the accidental nature of a transgression—are not already mutually known. In a preregistered online study, we tested whether children evaluate apologies with reference to the common ground shared between victims and transgressors.

Children aged 4- and 5-years-old ($N = 96$, UK-based) watched a picture book narration—presented to them via Zoom—in which two transgressors accidentally damaged a victim's artwork. The presence of the victim was manipulated. In the common ground condition, the victim was present and observed both transgressions directly, leaving them and the transgressor mutually aware of their accidental nature. In the absent condition, the victim was absent for both transgressions and returned only after the damage was done, resulting in knowledge of the accident being available to the transgressor but not the victim. Both transgressors apologised, but one also gave an explanation which emphasised the unintentionality of the harm (e.g., "I'm sorry, I was trying to see the picture better"). Using a partner choice paradigm, children then selected the transgressor they would rather help, play with, and trust with their own picture.

Findings revealed that when the accidents occurred in the victim's absence, 5-year-olds, but not 4-year-olds, preferred for the transgressor to give a reason for the harm caused, thereby bringing the unintentional nature of the act into common ground. But when the transgressions occurred in the victim's presence, neither age group showed any particular preference, since common ground for the accidents was already established. Building on earlier evidence (Waddington et al., 2022, 2023), the present study shows children from an early age evaluate the sufficiency of apologies based on the informational needs of social partners. More broadly, the findings highlight common ground as a key mechanism supporting children's emerging understanding of context-sensitive social repair in third-party interactions.

References

- Leary, M. R. (1996). *Self-presentation: Impression management and interpersonal behavior*. Routledge
- Oostenbroek, J., & Vaish, A. (2019). The emergence of forgiveness in young children. *Child Development, 90*, 1969-1986. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13069>
- Schleien, S., Ross, H., & Ross, M. (2010). Young children's apologies to their siblings. *Social Development, 19*, 170-186. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2008.00526.x>
- Schlenker, B. R. (1980). *Impression management: The self-concept, social identity, and interpersonal relations*. Brooks/Cole.
- Smith, C. E., & Harris, P. L. (2012). He didn't want me to feel sad: Children's reactions to disappointment and apology. *Social Development, 21*, 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2011.00606.x>
- Waddington, O., Jensen, K., & Köymen, B. (2022). Boundaries of apologies: Children avoid transgressors who give the same apology for a repeat offence. *Cognitive Development, 64*, 101264. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2022.101264>
- Waddington, O., Proft, M., Jensen, K., & Köymen, B. (2023). Five-year-old children value reasons in apologies for belief-based accidents. *Child Development, 94*, 143-153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13893>