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# Your Child's First Penance

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*Carol Luebering*

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## The Voice of Conscience: Learning Right From Wrong

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**Y**our child didn't understand what you meant when you first said "I'm sorry." Before gaining the ability to shape the words, a baby is a completely self-centered being who can neither imagine nor care about another's needs. An infant knows only one law: Seek comfort. When the tummy rumbles, when the diaper chafes, when cold or pain, fear or frustration strike, a baby cries for help without worrying about any other demands on a parent's attention.

As a toddler, your little one began to learn the house rules. Some actions gained your applause; others brought disapproval. Along with the first steps across the room came the first step in distinguishing good from bad. What made you smile was good; bringing a frown to your face was bad.

You set the rules because you are a loving parent. The rules express your concern for your child's health and safety, your need to safeguard possessions, your desire to keep family relationships warm and the household running smoothly.

By now, your youngster knows a lot of rules. Your child realizes that some things people do or fail to do are simply wrong. You shouldn't hurt someone or hurt someone's feelings. You shouldn't take other people's things or tell lies. You should do what parents and teachers tell you to do. You should not break the rules at home, in school or on the playground.

Rules are very important to children this age. They set clear boundaries.

God is a loving parent, too. In the childhood of the human race, God set down the house rules, giving Moses the Ten Commandments, which set boundaries on human behavior. The first three commandments ask respect for the divine Parent. The last seven reflect the same concern your rules show: God's wish that the children of the earth stay healthy and safe, treat one another fairly, avoid hurting anyone and keep the household running smoothly.

Jesus boiled the Ten Commandments down to two: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself (see Matthew 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28). He stated the second in even simpler terms, the "Golden Rule": Treat others as you would like to be treated (see Matthew 7:12).

The Golden Rule is by now beginning to make sense to your child. He does not yet fully grasp its implications—but neither do most grownups. Our moral sense continues to develop all our lives. In the years ahead your youngster will learn a great deal more about how human beings ought to be treated.

When your child was younger, she measured the seriousness of an offense by your reaction. Whatever made you most angry was the worst. Breaking something

important to you by accident often brought a stronger reprimand than breaking a toy on purpose. Therefore, in a very young child's limited reasoning, it isn't what you *mean* to do that matters, only the action itself.

Today your child is learning that intentions do matter. He is starting to grasp the difference between accidents and deliberate actions, between not understanding what may hurt another person and doing harm on purpose.

Unfortunately, human children of all ages do not always follow their best intentions. Wanting at heart to be good and loving persons, people of any age are easily distracted by selfish urges and end up neglecting good and doing wrong.

And when we do, the sense of right and wrong that has been developing since the earliest years—the voice of conscience—objects. We know we have sinned. And with the knowledge comes shame.

Shame is a feeling, one every human being knows when we think our inadequacies are exposed. But it's all too easy to confuse shame—*feeling* uneasy about ourselves—with *guilt*, which is a fact. We often feel worse about a lesser offense than a larger one. Children are especially vulnerable to the confusion. In young minds, guilt (“I did something bad”) quickly translates into shame (“I *am* bad”)—sometimes, unfortunately, with a little help from adults.



## *Examination of Conscience*

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The Sacrament of Penance begins with an examination of conscience—sorting real guilt from uneasy feelings. Your child will name and count the times she has knowingly said, thought, done or failed to do something with resulting harm to self or others.

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Happily, your child has also come to understand forgiveness, thanks to your willingness to keep offering a forgiving embrace and to apologize for your own mistakes.

Your youngster now knows the weight of those two words you spoke early on—“I’m sorry.” He knows that the feeling that prompts them is good, and your child understands the importance of saying the words out loud. Your child has learned that those two words begin healing a quarrel and can lessen punishment for an offense.

Being forgiven is by now a warmly familiar experience, the assurance you offer that a child who sometimes does bad things is still a good little person whom you love very much even at the worst moments.

And your willingness to ask your child’s forgiveness has taught your child that grownups also make mistakes, sometimes sinful mistakes. What your child has learned of forgiveness from you lays the ground for understand-

ing that no wrongdoing can cut God's children off from the divine love as long as they are sorry. Your child brings to the Sacrament of Reconciliation a knowledge of right and wrong and an understanding of those words heard from infancy: "I'm sorry."

### ***For Reflection and Discussion***

- *How is your sense of right and wrong different than it was when you were a child?*
- *What development have you seen in your child's sense of right and wrong? What changes do you expect to see in the coming years?*
- *What is your warmest memory of being forgiven?*
- *When did you find it hardest to forgive your child?*
- *When do you think it was hardest for your child to forgive you?*
- *How did you resolve things on those occasions? And how did each of you feel when you did?*



Father, our source of life,  
you know our weakness.  
May we reach out with joy to grasp  
your hand  
and walk more readily in your ways.  
*(Rite of Penance, #54)*

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I  
am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.  
I do not understand my own actions. For I  
do not do what I want, but I do the very thing  
I hate. (Romans 7:14-15.)



The education of the conscience is a lifelong  
task. From the earliest years, it awakens the  
child to the knowledge and practice of the  
interior law recognized by conscience.  
*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1784)*