

Nick: So, Mike, let me tell you a story, it was about three years ago now I was invited to speak at the World Forum Foundation on early care and education in Auckland, New Zealand and as you know, I'm part of a group that seeks to advance gender equity in ECE, and I'm some sitting down with one of my colleagues and mentors named Ron Black who is from Winnipeg or Manitoba, which is Eastern Canada, you know us Americans aren't so great at geography. But, we were sitting down to lunch and he's asking me what are some things that I talk about or don't talk about with children and Ron, if you're hearing this story shout out to you and all the great work you're doing, I hope you're well. Anyways, I say that I don't find it really valuable to teach kids to say I'm sorry. So I go into this whole spiel of how I feel saying sorry is this thing that if we teach kids this, they'll think that it's okay to say this one word and then run away from the situation because they filled their obligation to remedy it. So, Ron and I were chatting about it and he's like looking at me and I'm trying to read his face and it's kind of like I'm like... does he think I'm just like the biggest idiot or what? So, as I finish, I ask him what does he think and Ron tells me "you would make a horrible Canadian! We say sorry for everything. We apologize about the weather." So, Mike, I thought that was an interesting tidbit for the topic today.

Nick: Welcome to Napcast of podcast produced by Hilltop Children's Center here in Seattle, Washington on the traditional lands of the first people of Seattle, the Duwamish people. I'm your Co-host, Nick Terrones, pronouns are he/him

Mike: And I'm your Luigi to your Mario, the toad to your princess, Mike Browne, pronouns are he/him and I'm pumped for this topic. Because I hate the word sorry. So I don't think I can be a Canadian, Australian, or New Zealander either. I'm a straight New Yorker. Sorry isn't even in my vocabulary! So lets jump straight into it right there. Why does Sorry Suck?

Nick: Anytime I try and break this down to people it's met with some resistance. So I appreciate you allowing me the opportunity to really talk about this and for us to talk about why we have exercised this out of our vocabulary.

Let's look at why we say it sucks. I remember when I was a teen, my mom used to harp on me about saying no don't say that. Suck usually means it's something negative and I like to say sorry sucks because just saying sorry sucks all the effort out of the actual empathy building. It's like this quick one-off solution to say you empathize with the situation. It's superficial also for me the phrase I'm sorry it's just so empty. I think these days and honestly it's quite patronizing. For me, take a look at how early Western culture has bastardize this word or phrase sorry not sorry or saying something like sorry but you know and there's even a game called sorry for crying out loud, where you the game premise is to knock someone out of place but then you're supposed to say I'm sorry!

I was just thinking about before we hopped on you know there are the typical sayings you use I'm sorry for. You use it when you want to alleviate a situation quickly and you should just

get over it and then there's the sort of sarcastic well sorry but really I'm not sorry which I then ask, why are you even saying it and I know it sounds like to a lot of people out there that maybe these two guys are just airing out their grievance and that's fine and maybe they're thinking hey these guys are really reaching but you know I think with everything that we do with children and families or whenever you're really emotionally invested, social relationship based especially at your workplace, it's important to reflect on our language and consider why we say something, analyze our intentions behind words and really scrutinize their usefulness, effectiveness and sorry has just become such a customary thing that I wonder if today it holds any actual impact or are we just trying to hold on to some custom you know it's saying sorry it's just a fluffer, its a filler word.

Mike: So like for me man sorry it's just kind of one of those words that like you said it has lost its significance. We just sorta throwing around. And in this society, in this culture we live in, for me it starts to lose its meaning when we do that.

It's the same thing with the words "how are you?" Are you asking me how are you as you rush off to your next meeting, or are you actually stopping looking me in my eyes and generally caring about my well-being.

As a racialized being, I look at my language through a race and a class lens because I grew up poor and I grew up Black and what kept us alive was our relationships.

Nick: Yeah, and I don't mean to cut you off Mike but you know when when you had presented this idea of the topic and made a comparison to how are you, I found myself catching myself doing the same thing.

So, I'm trying to be cognizant of that and focus on how they are doing. What if you ask it and someone is like I'm not doing well? How can I slow myself down and stop and look at them in the eyes when I ask them how are ya? I wonder how many people actually stop and does that. We're just so used to being like I'm good, I'm fine and then you just move on and what I would love to know, I want to try to practice, just throw people for a loop you know and be like I'm not doing so great and see will they stop and try to continue the conversation or keep moving.

Mike: Right, exactly. There are inequities that are happening and Black bodies are being slain in the street, I even think about the homie in Wisconsin who was getting in the car, Jacob Blake was his name, and was gunned down. Actually caring and putting weight behind your words could be the difference for people. A lot of people are mentally struggling and they need a sincere reach out. You caring about their wellbeing could literally take them down off the ledge.

I just think about all these words we can be intentional with and just keep going back to the words I'm sorry. Language is key and something I'm really big and I'm really big on. I think it's both part of my communications background and a part of my culture. So, if I tell you my homegirl called me and said she caught covid-19 and you tell me oh I'm sorry. My first initial gut reaction is like what are you sorry about? I'm going to challenge you to examine those words. Are you sorry because you made her sick? Are you sorry because it made you upset to hear it? Or are you sorry because you have nothing else to say? I'm not here for your pity or for your puppy dog eyes. Tell me I hope she feels better soon, tell me it sucks. But you telling me you're sorry does absolutely nothing for me. Emphasize with me not sympathize. I've been called everything from heartless to a jerk to words the FCC won't approve of and to that I say I'm sorry for being unapologetically Black. Unapologetically me.

Mike: Now that's us. That's what we believe in. And because of that, this unapologetic stance, this idea of why sorry sucks, becomes a part of our work with children. And to support children in learning why sorry sucks, it means they have to understand and identify feelings first. You have an arsenal of tools that you excel in. I mean, I would know. Over the years, I've written a handful of blogs about you, you've written a boatload of blogs on it, and we shot a video together around your work on Social Emotional Learning. That video was part of a segment called Community Voices, which you can check out by visiting, [www.hilltopcc.com/institute/voices](http://www.hilltopcc.com/institute/voices). You've also been featured several times in a handful of resources on Exchange Magazine as well as twice on a podcast by Nini White called Big Picture Social Emotional Learning podcast. Episode 67 and 68 back in May, 2020. So, taking all of that experience and work you've done over the years, I think it's important we just hear how you support children in naming, framing and expressing their feelings.

Nick: What we do for children is what we do for for humankind and what we're doing for all of us. Social emotional learning is a lifetime journey and it does not start and end in childhood. I know you and I have talked about the various ways of where we recognize our faults and missteps and where we got to improve on particular things.

We have experience to be able to do that on our own free. A lot of times children don't have that and that's our job as Educators in the lives of children. To give them tools to be able to do that and you know as human beings at all ages and stages of life. We're constantly bombarded with experiences that elicit emotions many of which we experience at the young age and we're trying to give them the tools so that they may be able to respond to them appropriately and by that I mean in pro-social healthy ways. Pro-social healthy ways varies from culture to culture for sure. What we can make a huge difference in is the relationships we can sustain when we make those pro-social healthy choices and as with any life skill and ability, early experiences matter and this is especially true when it comes to emotions in the cognition of dealing with them - control and self-regulation - and what I've learned over time and still figuring it out is that generally humans do not want to be fixed. I mean sometimes that's true and there's avenues for that and sometimes we need to know concrete examples of

what to do but usually we just want to be listened to, acknowledge, validated and in that process and powered through a process of self-discovery and usually for children this means they want to know what they're feeling, what does it mean in the context of feeling it, and what they can do with it and you know the processing framework behind a new complexities that they're getting at.

Mike: All I Ever Wanted growing up was to be value. To be seen to be visible. My mom was always saying be seen not heard. In what you just said, I'm hearing remnants of all of that, you know, the idea that children should be valued, visible, and validated. When I think about children's feelings I think about being validated. Validation is not only a tool for educators, its something we should all strive for. What about the tool of validation is so important? How can you validate a child when when they might be acting out or showing a range of emotions. My mom would probably just be like, the child feet are probably just sweaty, as she said in Episode 8. But I'm thinking back to last week and how every child I was greeting at the door were having these huge reaction across the spectrum. From happiness to see me, to anger at their parents, to confusion as to why their adults were leaving them for the first time to this stranger, and I was started to feel a bit overwhelmed between having multiple children crying simultaneously, to feeling of these parent and guardian looking at me, and just that saboteur on my shoulder telling me "these parents don't trust you, a male, to take care of their child!

Nick: These dang saboteurs are creeping up and telling you things like I'm not always in the class and I haven't been trained to be in the class or whatever so what I hear the saboteurs doing is victimization. I think about you know when do we start picking up on those saboteurs? Do children have these saboteurs or are they like learned over time?

But coming back to your question about validation, again and again to me someone really acknowledging the humanity of us and acknowledging in the children, I hear you, I see you, would you like me to be in the situation with you? Can I be a source of strength with you? Not can I fix it for you but can I be there with you and in help shoulder whatever this burden is for you? In our classroom, I take that burden for children.

Mike: I'm liking this thing you keep saying about not fixing kids cuz you know our industry is mostly white identifying females and when you're white and working with a Black child or child of color and suddenly now you starting to think about fixing kids, you're using remnants of ideology of the white savior complex. That also stems from the racial narratives that we associate to these kids. If we have a strong image of a child, and work bottom up rather than implementing this top down approach, we can find more authentic ways to validate children.

Nick: I figure this is a great time too to bring this up, because I think a lot of the times and I think I've talked about it on one of our napcast before and that especially our Black and Brown children still aren't viewed as people. I think there's a lot of programs out there that

try and fix and they're not something to be fixed. I think it really speaks to what I hear you saying, it speaks to the process of really just being together, that our species, that human being needs to be together, give love, to be in a space that's compassionate, not in a space where we are looked at as deficits.

Mike: Haha ask a couple of my last girlfriends who tried to fix me, clearly that didn't work so that love and compassion is where it should be rooted in and that's how you get that validation.

Nick: Usually the person trying to fix someone, there's a lot of good intentions behind it and that fixing is like usually coming from how they think you should be. That's like that the white savior complex like this particular mold to be okay is generally not with the individual needs. Human beings especially children are resilient. And children are so resilient because they don't have a lot of the burden of experience telling them what they should be like or not. I'm going to coin that phrase, the burden of experience. Haha.

Mike: I think about the socialization piece on my end as well.

I read this study published by NCBI, right because sometimes I geek out on this stuff. But the study authored by Tara Chaplin states "Small but significant gender differences in emotion expressions have been reported for adults, with women showing greater emotional expressivity, especially for positive emotions and internalizing negative emotions such as sadness."

Part of our responsibilities as males in ECE is to break the cycle of toxic masculinity and the stigma that we should limit the expression of our emotions. We touched a bit on this in our interview with Veronica on Machismo and the role culture plays on it. But I'd love to dig a bit deeper with you.

Is it hard for you to externalize your emotions? How does your culture view male and emotions? How are you engaging in conversations with children about emotional expression?

Nick: Yeah I definitely have suffered from the typical machismo and even just the Western Standard that says men don't cry. Big boys don't cry. When big boys and boys are not allowed to cry they take it out in other ways. I would encourage any male listeners and if you have specifically a male identifying partner in your life or someone who seems to be emotionally stunted or blocked, I recommend this because it's what I've been doing. First of all, not fixing, and secondly, encouraging them or yourself to allow yourself to let go. For me it's like a muscle memory to not cry. It's painful for me to actually allow myself to cry it's like on working a muscle because when I do find myself to try to cry I just feel this weight. My body clenches. I've been conditioned to do so for so long for 36 years and and it's become such a strong muscle that I'm trying to ease that muscle and so what I do on my own time and it

sounds cheesy but it's effective I go on YouTube and I look at like soldiers returning home to their pets, soldiers coming back from war and in the daughters are in the auditorium about to graduate, like I'm starting to get a little teary right now. But it's really working on just allowing myself to let go.

Mike: Dude those videos gets me too haha.

Nick: Right, they are so good. Just try and let yourself cry and try and find ways to let it out.

Nick: Some songs just get to you. Sometimes Ashley, my girlfriend will be there

Mike For me it's a good Whitney Houston song.

Nick: Oh yeah, for me its Florence and the Machine

Mike: And I think I cut you off but it sounded like Ashley supports you in this. She doesn't ridicule you.

Nick: Absolutely. She's supporting me in this growth and I'm grateful.

But you know what I think in all that, in the way I described that in my own body, I think it's a testament to how our Western culture views males and emotions like we're supposed to be strong. And crying and shedding tears is a sign of weakness. For some reason another emotion that's okay for males is being angry. I have no idea why it's okay for us to be destructive and angry but it's not okay to be vulnerable, to cry and when we know and what we've seen so far in the world is that males being destructive and angry isn't progress for humankind at all or for any society. I think back to when I was in India teaching a couple years ago there was a commercial that that they were showing in India that was trying to point out that boys should cry.

It was of this young boy and it went through a montage of him through the years and people telling him how boys don't cry, boys shouldnt do that etc. And then later on it showed him just like angry. They showed him squeezing his muscles and then as the camera zooms out, you see that he's holding a woman in like an armbar and like hurting her and it said allow your boys to otherwise they'll make others cry.

Mike: Damn why does every country does something better than us haha!

Mike: I've never been more conscientious in my life about how I externally express my emotions than when I'm with the children in our program. And it varies with the age difference. Being with toddlers and preschoolers for me, it's easy to just wear it on my sleeve. To just be like "hey, I'm sad." I think part of it is what you mentioned before, their

world is so ego-centric. So for me, it feels a little bit more authentic being with toddlers and showing my emotions.

When I'm with the older kids, the elementary school aged children in our program, I feel like I have to be very intentional in expressing my emotions in all forms, facially, vocally, and even with my posture. Children at that age, age 6 to 10 are less ego-centric and even more perceptive than their toddler counterparts and each action we do is communicating or even attempting to mask our current emotional state.

So being vigilant in that aspect is key when I'm with the big kids. All day long they are exposed to behaviors that are associated to their gender and over time through cognitive learning, socialization, and experience, they normalize them. So finding ways and opportunities to counteract that by telling them antidotes about how I used to dance ballet, or skipping rope in the class, or wearing colors like pink that have historically been associated with femme identifying people, or even getting my hair braided by one of the children one afternoon, which was a lot cheaper than going to the hairdresser, and then inviting male participation into some of the games we played, is giving a counter-narrative to the master narrative.

Mike: We'll be right back..

Commercial: Hilltop Children's Center is a high quality preschool, afterschool program, and professional development institute of early learning and inquiry serving the Seattle community since 1971. Together, we are working with the next generation of inventors, leaders, thinkers, artists, and social activists. For more information on our professional development and community outreach including workshops, presentations, blogs, coaching and consulting, and of course, this napcast, please visit [www.hilltopcc.com](http://www.hilltopcc.com)

Mike: Children are wired for empathy. So, if insisting on apologies is not necessary, then what do we do?

Nick: You know I'd like to believe that given the right circumstances all human brains are set up and ready and are wired for it. Our natural desire of being in relationships, since we're social creatures, we need people. And we have seen overtime through history what happens when young human beings are deprived of that and when they're deprived of early positive early learning play experiences and social experiences. When I insist on teaching my toddler not to say I'm sorry, what I'm doing is guiding them through a process of accountability. Helping them recognize that you know there's consequences to actions and again all of this sounds all really big but toddlers can do this and it's all just through experience and doing real life things. For example, I see you hitting this person with that toy I'm going to take that toy and move you away until you're ready to be safe. My job is to keep you all safe and it's to

keep other people safe. Hitting someone with that car, a metal car is not safe I'm not going to have them then go over and say I'm sorry but what we have to do is to coach them to do is to be like are you okay? And in that I'm really helping them to establish the process of empathy. I think saying I'm sorry is jumping to the product, a quick mode of empathy right now but really at this young age we want children to understand that there is a nuanced process to remedy a situation with someone.

Too many times in the past I have seen an accident and I used to go tell them I'm sorry and I would try to empathize like that. Or I would try and model for children what sorry should sound like and I would lower my voice and say it a little lighter, and be like I'm sorry Mike. And the kids would realize like oh all I have to do is say I'm sorry and I can bail on the situation.

Mike: and then that's how they become politicians.

Nick: Hahah yeah exactly. And again its like I said earlier in the episode if we start bastardizing the word you know it'll become useless. We don't want to take away from the actual process of empathy building in your children. It comes back to keeping them accountable like that example with the metal car. It's showing them and having them go through the process and showing them accountability by still not letting them have the metal car and tell them we're going to move on.

Mike: Are there times when you've created opportunities for children to learn how to make amends? And if so, how have you activated children's empathy or modeled making amends?

Nick: That's a really great question and honestly like I think once they go through that process of like I made this mistake and went through the process of empathy building and then following up as they grow older to give them language to help them clarify intentions.

Children are socially awkward and they don't know how to communicate at times. Sometimes you'll see a kid hit another kid with a metal car and are smiling. Not because they wanted to hurt them but because they think they are playing with one another. Helping children to communicate and understanding intentions are important. Helping them clarify their own intentions and communicate that to others and then allowing that other party to see what their intentions are. And when something bad does happen, it's teaching the kid not to just to say orry but to check in with each other, and asks what do you need to feel better? Sometimes the child is like, I need a hug and they naturally make their amends. And then moments later you see them go run off and play together.

I think to us, as adults, a lot of times we take a child biting or hitting as an aggressive behavior and then if you start treating it as such, the child starts realizing like oh this is who I am. An aggressive person. And then putting it back into the realm of working with Brown and Black



children, it's important to know the context of these children. If this child is having certain stressors in their lives and they're just sort of always in this mode of fight and flight, maybe they're not trying to be aggressive but they're hungry or they're tired, and now they're under stress at school. This is where it really comes down to understanding all behaviors have underlying reasons. Behaviors in children aren't random.

Mike: What are the different ways you've seen children express their sincere apology? And what are some alternative ways do you say sorry or encourage children to apologize?

Nick: I'm going to repeat it but it's helping children just clarify their own intentions. This new thing I've been trying is using these situations and calling them accidents. I think it's helping them distinguish what was on accident and what was on purpose.

As you know, toddlers are just getting to know their own body space and combine multiple in a room and they are just like bumper cars on two feet. There was this one time in the sandbox 1 kid was just running to me to tell me something exciting that they just did and at the same time another kid was swinging off of a rope and just kick him right in the face. I wouldn't have blamed him if he got up and tried to start like hitting this other kid out of just emotional physical reaction. And after all that coaching that we have went through especially with this particular kid, I was so happy to see jump off the swing and communicate. The child who was kicked was like I didn't like that, I need you to check in on me. I don't like you kicking me in the face. And you could see the empathy on these kids faces.

The kid was calmly explaining that I didn't mean to kick you. You were running and I was swinging and it was an accident. Seeing them talk and then going through, more or less the script that we have empowered them with felt great. The kid went over and asked if they were okay and you see them trying and talking in a low voice and they puts their hand on their back because I also showed them that a little physical gesture, a little physical connection can be okay in addition to asking how are you? Do you need an ice pack? You need your mommy? What can I do to help you out? And then you know just hearing that the kid who was on the ground was just like no I'm not okay, but be careful. Next time watch out. I didn't rush to jump in. I let them go to their process right. This was a learning opportunity for them. A teachable moment.

Mike: So often I think we are quick to rush in. To jump in. To interject. It's great seeing how hands off our educators are here because of that trust in the children.

Nick: And trusting ourselves if you know you've done at least an adequate job at instilling particular lessons in kids. I feel comfortable and confident by this point in the year in letting children have agency of their situation because they have been coached and have gone through enough, in any good coaching there's a lot of repetition and being a toddler you're going to have lots and lots of it so I trust my own process and that what I have said that I have given them the empowerment to do it themselves.

And it's with any other skill. Like I can leave them with a glass jar of paint and a paintbrush and paper and they know what to do with it. I can trust in my process of coaching that I have done throughout the whole year. It takes a long time but by this point I can just sit and watch. If I saw the child got up and starting going after them, I would have intervened, but I can see that it wasn't happening and lot of times you just got to trust yourself and be confident in the process that you haven't our children with

Mike: I'm loving the stories. Do you have one more? What about one that involves adults? How do you apologize to adults?

Nick: In taking this not sorry approach, it's not that I'm not apologetic but what I like to do is clarify what I intend to do better next time we run into this situation and that happens a lot when you're in teaching teams.

I like to say yes I said this. Its what intended to say and here is what I meant. I also say next time we run into this problem what I will do more effectively maybe not better but more efficiently.

I am not going to say I'm sorry for saying this but I'm going to let you know what my remedy in this situation is going to be and how I'm going to grow from it because it's the process and I don't want say I'm sorry to make you or myself feel better.

I am telling you verbally and showing you that this is how I'm going to be accountable to the thing that was a mistake.

Mike: Thank you Nick.

Nick: Thank you Mike.