

## ACADEMIA | Letters

### *“He said sorry” - Well that changes everything.*

Anne Eason

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I have worked in the criminal justice sector for many years in one guise or another but more recently, in leading policing programs that form the new professionalisation routes from the College of Policing (2021). My teaching on the programs is featured around victimology and domestic/sexual violence (reflective of my practice) so you can understand why I was ‘up in arms’ when I heard that a police officer had told a mother that the boy, aged 16 who was in a relationship with her 15 year old daughter and who had hit in the face causing long-term structural (and psychological) damage, would have no further action taken against him because he had “said sorry”.

The officer said, I quote, “that changes everything”. Changes what? Changes the damage to the cheekbone of the girl that causes intermittent swelling and bruising due to dislodging one of her teeth? Changes the psychological trauma of not wanting to go to school or out with friends because her face is black? Changes the anxiety of being a girl and feeling vulnerable to boys because they’re allowed to hit you? What it does change is this – the girl/mother will never report an abusive act towards her by a future partner because, well why bother? As long as he says sorry and for the boy of course, it has merely reinforced that you can abuse your girlfriend as much as you like as long as you say sorry, after all there are no consequences and even the police agree!

I am sure we are all aware that research on domestic abuse is extensive where Women’s Aid ([www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)) continue to report 1.3m women experience some form of abuse within their lifetime and this is significantly lower than the real crime figures, which Hoyle (2007) amongst others suggest is preceded by 30 instances that have not been recorded. Is it any wonder, then, that this hidden and damaging crime perpetuates when young boys are not held accountable for their actions because they “said sorry”? The officer explained to the mother that now they knew he had apologised, it changed the way they were approaching any

possible legal action. In other words, it was not even worth a caution!

This makes a mockery of the positive action strategy that is designed to promote reductive/preventative interventions in domestic abuse incidents (College of Policing, 2015; Richards et al, 2008; Rowe, 2007). Agencies like Womens Aid or Refuge and authors such as Craven (2008), Hoyle (2007) DuBois-Maahs (2020) or Groves and Thomas (2014) are very clear about the cycle of abuse and the reconciliation period that involves apologies and gestures of remorse. They emphasise that this is a part of the cyclical pattern where many victims get trapped, through the coercive and manipulative behaviour of their abuser. This process of disempowerment is vital to the abuser's ambition to ensure their victim's compliance and maintain the vital element of power in the relationship (Craven 2008). The use of violence, whether physical, psychological or sexual forms part of that coercion, allowing threats of further violence as part of the intimidation and compliance dynamic. Thus, they all state that "saying sorry" should not be accepted as an indicator of change. Indeed, it is an empty gesture that lacks sincerity and should be considered part of that coercive process.

Police officers are given a significant amount of teaching and training around domestic abuse which includes the implementation of the positive action strategy and the concept of power and control as set out by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (<https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheels>). When managing a domestic abuse incident the positive action strategy sets out a clear 'duty of positive action' (College of Policing, 2014; Richards et al, 2008) that places a legal obligation on them to take the necessary steps to ensure the protection of the victim and pursue the perpetrator. This may involve an arrest, or detention or at very least, an assessment of potential future risk through the undertaking of a Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment and Honour Based Violence (DASH) risk identification tool (SafeLives, 2015; Richards, 2020; Richards et al, 2008). This is supported by the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy (Home Office, 2016) and in this particular case, specifically by the Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2018) in the protection of children. These are all based upon the idea of victim protection and a crime prevention model that seeks to intervene at the earliest opportunity (Maguire, Brookman and Robinson, 2017). This raises the question, therefore, that where a clear breach of these legislative and policy guidance has been made through an act of physical violence, that saying sorry not only contradicts this guidance, but reinforces the very behaviour that domestic abuse agencies and researchers have sought for years to change. The action of one, female officer, a Police Constable, could change the thinking and attitudes of two young people, and their peers but not in the way in which they were trained and is expected of an agency representative whose role is to enforce the law and representative of the 'will of the people', but rather perpetuating the old, stale views of patriarchal privilege and second-class citizenship. They'll

be bringing the rule of thumb back next!

I'm not disappointed, but dismayed and furious that in the 21st century such poor policing still exists and that somehow, domestic abuse still appears to be overlooked as a serious crime. I feel privileged that I am in a position to influence the input that some of the new police officers receive in terms of academic teaching and that I have opportunities, like this, to express my concerns and raise awareness to others that this type of short-sighted and disruptive practice continues to exist. At the end of the day, however, the only real way for change to occur is if those new recruits practice in the way the knowledge, skills and behaviours we teach are actually implemented. We can only wait and see.

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