

What Parents Should Tell Their Children (Ages 3 to 12) about Forgiveness

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Abstract

In this chapter, I describe an understanding of forgiveness and combine that with developmental psychological theories to arrive at practical guidelines for parents and providers of counsel and support for parents on what to say to your child about forgiveness. I cover the wide age range from 3 to 12 years old, where parental communications will differ greatly. This article is aimed at Christian parents, so the overall framework is one of Christian psychology.

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The comics are filled with illustrations of siblings psychologically torturing each other (and their parents). These comics might bring the occasional chuckle for people looking back to their childhood. But, parents who have children who are squabbling and often hurt each other physically or psychologically cringe with the reality of the hurts and wonder about the long-term effects on their loved ones. Curiously, almost never do the authors-illustrators of comics deal with how children can get past these hurts. With minimal lasting damage.

In this article, I'm going to give you the line-drawing—the practical advice—first, for those who just want to know what to do. But then I'll color in the sketch with an understanding first of forgiveness, and then religious and spiritual development, and finally

how they fit together to reveal the outlines I sketch in the first part of the article.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO WHEN CHILDREN HURT EACH OTHER—THE SKETCH

Here are seven general observations. Then I will offer a summary of age-specific advice.

Seven Observations

First, the relationship between parent and child might be more important than the content of what is taught about forgiveness. I must say that that observation is a statement uncontaminated by research evidence just based on practical unsystematic observation. I believe that the content of what to do to forgive is important, vital even. But relationships makes the content “stick.”

Second, how to promote spiritual formation in children is difficult and is largely age-related. Two factors make spiritual formation efforts by parents “stick”: (a) practice and repetition of effective application of good content and (b) a supportive relationship (Worthington et al., 2019).

Third, families often cannot articulate what they really need (Green et al., 2020). Often, for example, they might say they need more time to teach their children. But they don't consider how they might use the time and whether more time might simply stamp in unhelpful intervention more thoroughly.

Fourth, peers are increasingly important as children age (Havewala et al., 2021). In early childhood, children have little control over their schedules, but as they enter middle school, they tend to interact with peers more and parents less. So, the wise parent gets to know their children's friends and pays attention to the web of relationships at church. Because many children interact with friends at church that they do not go to school with, the commonalities with those children are weaker because shared experiences are weaker than with school mates. So, wise parents cannot assume that just because their child is in the youth group, there will be a lot of positive peer influence.

Fifth, children learn mostly by observation rather than by direct instruction (Bandura, 1986). So the wise parents will be sure to walk their talk, providing positive models for their children.

Sixth, breakdowns in relationship between parent and child are not abject failures. They are what psychotherapists call “ruptures in the emotional bond” (Safran et al., 2011). But they are simultaneously wonderful teaching opportunities for confessing mistakes, apologizing, offering to make amends, and asking for forgiveness when the parent committed a wrong. And they are opportunities for gently asking for an explanation of the child’s decision process when the child has offended and being generous to extend forgiveness when the parent has hurt feelings.

Seventh, what kids can learn about forgiveness specifically is highly dependent on their age (Garthe & Guz, 2020). Systematic interventions to help an early adolescent (entering middle school) are about three times as effective as with an eight-year old. It’s not that we cannot teach very young children something important about forgiving, but we must be very realistic about what we can get across.

Practical Age-Related Suggestions

Now, let’s make some practical suggestions based on these observations. Some relate to children across the three to twelve age span. Some are specific to smaller age-groupings.

Children aged three to twelve. At all ages of children, be particularly mindful of how you, as a parent, deal with wrongs in relating to your child and in all other relationships that children can observe. Also strive to have a warm and supportive, yet firmly standards-based relationship with your child.

Children aged three through six. That done (and it is never really “done”), with children aged three to six, aim at simply building a structure (a scaffold) of teaching and modeling accepting responsibility for wrongs done, apologizing for those wrongs, and making restitution for wrongs (Garthe & Guz, 2020). And for the receiving end of a wrong, encourage hurt or offended children to say, “I forgive you.” Try to achieve a balance between what is just and fair and forgiveness. You don’t want to train your child to be a doormat for bullies. But you also don’t want to train your child to be someone who withholds forgiveness until the offender kowtows to them.

Children aged seven through nine or ten. Use inspiring stories of forgiveness (Bible stories, films, books, etc.) and simple instruction about what forgiveness is and when to use it to supplement the scaffolding of forgiveness structures. Some parents are very

verbal and tend to over-estimate the ability of their children to process and use direct teaching. It's like Garrison Keillor's famous monologue-closer about a mythical Minnesota town: "That's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lake_Wobegon. Other parents are more action-oriented and think the kids will learn what they need without direct instruction. Both sides are likely off the mark. Similarly, kids differ just like parents do. So, what "works" for one child might be too much or not enough discussion for another child—even a close sibling. The practical guidance for parents is, keep your eyes open and be sensitive to your child, the situation, and the way both of you are responding. Don't lock into some kind of formula about what you "should" teach about forgiveness.

Children aged nine, ten, or eleven and up. As children mature into early adolescence, move more toward principles and concepts and expect questions. Peers will be much more important as children move toward or into middle school (Havewala et al., 2021). Keep abreast of who your child is relating to and what their problems

are. One of the best ways to do this is establish a ritual of talking about the day when children come home from school. (This is best established as soon as they enter school, but it tends to pay more dividends as they start making more independent choices.) And by “talking about the day” I mean asking what happened and listening to the child talk. Yes, we parents have some wonderful wisdom to impart to our children, but usually that wisdom needs to be invited to have its best effect, not thrust upon the child. Listen to your child. Talk sparingly.

When Are the Teachable Moments?

There are three prime times that parents can teach children about forgiveness. First, they can model forgiveness, which is especially important in times when the parent is provoked to anger. Second, they can teach proactively, when the children are not in the midst of a conflict or not actively dealing with a transgression. And third, they can teach reactively, when they are in the throes of hurt and resentment. Or perhaps better, when they cool down.

Modeling Forgiveness

Children learn at least as much from social modeling as from explicit teaching. Thus, it is important for parents, especially when they are provoked, to respond with forgiveness rather than invective. This means, unfortunately, that we as parents must be attentive to our inner lives and to the triggers that bring out anger and resentment even when we are not aware of the triggers. What we do will be copied by our children.

Proactive Teaching about Forgiveness

When teaching about forgiveness proactively, one of the best ways is through stories. Bible stories are great. However, movies and children's age-appropriate books are also good. Numerous examples from the Bible and from life that is contemporary to show how people who are wronged and resentful can deal with that in other ways besides acting negatively on the resentment. This teaching educates the child in forgiveness rather than trying to pressure the child to forgive.

Some teaching can be devoted to the options that children have to deal with injustices. There are many ways to do so productively and within a Christian framework. Forgiveness is one of

those ways. Injustices can be handled by seeking justice, turning the matter over to God, tolerating, forbearing, or accepting, or forgiving. Proactive teaching, can consider each of these. The child can be coached to combine them or zero in on one.

If they want to forgive, they can try to make a decision to forgive. They can also learn to experience emotional forgiveness. A good decision to forgive involves committing not to pay the other person back in negative kind and treating the offender as a valued and valuable person. Emotional forgiveness involves replacing negative unforgiving emotions and motivations with positive other-oriented emotions like empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love.

Children who have harmed someone else can learn to give a good confession of their hurtful behavior without denying, justifying, or excusing their behavior and they can learn to ask for forgiveness. That confession involves taking responsibility for their behavior, apologizing, offering to make restitution, and asking for forgiveness. It can also involve self-forgiveness.

Reactive Teaching about Forgiveness

Children who have been hurt or wronged can learn to make a good request for an explanation of why the person did something harmful (called making a good reproach; see Worthington, 2003). Depending on what happened, the children can decide on how to handle the injustice—by seeking justice, turning the matter over to God, tolerating, forbearing, or accepting, or forgiving.

When children are dealing with an immediate wrong, usually, teaching is limited. (Probably more accurately, learning is limited.) First, there are aroused emotions, and children often do not learn positive experiences well when negatively aroused. They are operating largely from their limbic system, not their prefrontal cortex. (They do seem to learn negative reactions quite well under negative arousal.) Second, the motivation and urge to strike back is strongest when emotion is high, so that strong urge needs to be countered immediately. Third, teaching time is limited. The injustice and emotions are urgently now. Teaching must be brief and powerful. Fourth, parents, too, can be negatively aroused. If their children have been hurt or wronged, parents' emotions can be actively engaged, and they are not in teaching mode.

Because teaching time and openness is limited, parents usually use scaffolding. In the same way that a scaffold on a building that is under construction, a scaffold is a platform on which a worker can stand and try to make changes on the building that is physically inside the scaffold, parents can teach their children the external behaviors on each side of interactions that center around forgiveness.

Parents also need to use self-calming (on themselves, first) to lower the negative emotions of resentment. Then, they can suggest to children that they take some deep breaths to calm themselves. It isn't so much that parents who calm themselves teach their children self-soothing. It's more a relational learning by the children. They see how parents act when emotionally aroused, and the modeling kicks in.

Often, when parents teach children to forgive—especially in proactive teaching—the one who benefits the most is the parent. The parent takes time to think about the essence of forgiveness, is inspired to show the child that they are forgiving, and they are able to process forgiveness and a much deeper cognitive level than the typical child.

COLORING INSIDE THE LINES

In the following sections, I seek to fill in some of the details about my recommendations above. This will involve some referring to theories or research on child rearing and on forgiveness.

Modeling Forgiveness

Practice forgiving every day in every way that you can. Seek to survey your life and forgive those who have harmed you in the past but whom you may still hold resentment against today. Try to figure out how you can help others be more forgiving whether that is a child or a workmate or friend or spouse or whomever.

When parents are wounded and broken and have suffered resentments and harms in their past, often their fuses are short if they have not forgiven the harm. The people that they often explode upon are the loved ones that they spend time with each day. Often that is not a co-worker because that has a lot of negative implications in the workplace. It often is their children and their partner. So, one thing that parents can do is to examine themselves and see whether they have unforgiven hurts that are deep within them. Then they can work through forgiveness of the people who have hurt or offended them so that they will not pass this on to children or partners. If they do spew

anger out on a partner or child, they can practice dealing well with their own wrongdoing by giving a good account of their behavior. A good account can be summarized by the acronym CONFESS (Worthington, 2003). That involves confessing (C) without excuse, offering (O) an apology, noting (N) the pain that they have inflicted on the partner or child through the transgression, stating that (F) forever valuing the partner or child (i.e., saying “I love you” and meaning it) is more important than saving face, offer to make amends, or equalize (E) for what one has done to hurt the other, say (S) that the parent will try never again to repeat the harmful action, and seeking forgiveness (S).

When we explode in anger or resentful invective, children watch and learn from us. Sometimes we think that if we teach forgiveness explicitly, the children will learn to forgive. Research on social learning, however, is clear. If we talk about forgiveness but do not practice it consistently, children will learn what we do. They will learn to talk a good game of longsuffering forgiveness but practice anger and resentment. But if we do lose our temper and hurt someone, we also can model the CONFESS acronym.

Proactive Teaching about Forgiveness

Very young children, 3 to 5, often play with others, especially if they attend preschool. As they play, they interact and sometimes experience frustration of their will. Often that seems as if the other child is being unjust and offensive. Perhaps the child likes a toy and wants to keep it. The other child also wants a turn and agitates to take the toy or to get the teacher or parent to intercede on his or her behalf. The one with the toy wants to keep it, and sees the other as interloper. The same conflict from the other side might be perceived by the one without the toy as being bullied or as the toy possessor as selfish. Children are learning fairness and how to share, even when they don't want to.

Tailor Forgiveness Education to the Age and Capabilities of Your Child (and Your Own Capabilities)

Sadly, we over-estimate the capabilities and attributes of our children and ourselves. We fervently want our children to excel. We realize we

are (partly) responsible for helping them toward maturity. But how? There just are things that three-year olds can't do. And perhaps shouldn't do. One of those is to understand and practice forgiveness like an early, middle, or late adolescent or young (or older) adult.

Rather than throw up our hands in surrender, or opt for a strategy that hopes that children will develop into their best selves if we let them develop naturally, we can find a middle ground. We can help children with age-appropriate ways to deal with hurts without pressuring them into too-early developmental tasks or expecting them to act like mini-me adults. Or, without a permissive kids-will-be-kids philosophy or a kids-learn-by-living-and-we-can-best-help-by-staying-out-of-their-way approach.

To prepare to teach proactively about forgiveness, you'll need to understand what to teach about forgiveness. It is also helpful to know how to teach effectively (i.e., your philosophy of education). Amazingly, just being a parent does not confer wisdom on us. Besides general teaching knowledge and skill, we need to know specifically how to teach about forgiveness.

Understand What to Teach about Forgiveness The stress-and-coping theory of forgiveness (Worthington, 2006).

Forgiveness is understood as a coping response to the *stressor* of experiencing an injustice. People who perceive that they have been unjustly treated can *appraise* the situation in terms of (a) whether the injustice threatens their health, mental health, relationships, or spiritual position, (b) whether they think they can successfully deal with it, and (c) the degree of injustice they personally are experiencing when taking into account the transgression plus all relative events that have happened since (i.e., did the offender continue to offend or hurt; did the offender repent, apologize, and seek to make amends; etc.). The degree of perceived injustice is called the *injustice gap*. The difficulty of dealing with the injustice is directly related to the size of the perceived injustice gap. Big gaps are harder to handle.

Big perceived injustices create *stress reactions*. These are physical (heart rate and fight-or-flight arousal), emotional (i.e., general arousal, anger, fear or anxiety, and often tending toward

resentment, bitterness, hatred, hostility), motivational, and cognitive. The degree and type of stress reaction creates a need to look for a way to manage or cope with the stress.

There are many ways of *coping* with perceived injustices. These include seeking or observing justice (which reduces the size of the injustice gap), turning the matter over to God (which relieves the person of responsibility to deal with all of the injustice done, though there might still be claims to respond responsibly), tolerating the injustice, forbearing (i.e., tolerating the injustice but for the sake of the relationship or group), accepting, and forgiving. There are other ways to change the size of the injustice gap, but they tend to be not helpful. For example, seeking revenge and excusing or justifying the offender's actions can reduce the size of the injustice gap, but lead to continued conflict and unjust solutions most of the time. Importantly, parents can teach this variety of great coping strategies to their children for managing injustice. Forgiveness is only one way of coping with the stress of unforgiveness. It does not have to do all of the heavy lifting.

Forgiveness is of two types. *Decisional forgiveness* is an intention statement that one intends to treat the offender differently in the future, not seeking revenge or payback but seeking to treat the person as a valued and valuable person. *Emotional forgiveness* is the emotional replacement of negative unforgiving emotions (i.e., resentment, anxiety, hatred) with positive other-oriented emotions (i.e., empathy, sympathy, compassion, or love). The two experiences are not necessarily related to each other. Either of them may occur first and the other might or might not ensue.

Experiencing either decisional or emotional forgiveness (or both at points near each other in time) stimulates the desire to reconcile. *Reconciliation* is restored trust. It is interpersonal, and thus is not part of forgiveness per se. Reconciliation, if it is to occur, requires people to be mutually trustworthy (or at least be sincerely trying to be trustworthy). A child who is being bullied daily can forgive the bully, but will likely not reconcile with the bully who is dedicated to harming the child.

Understand How to Teach (i.e., Philosophy of Education)

What you'll gravitate toward depends on your philosophical position, whether derived from academic study, from interacting with people within your circle of friends, or from just living. There are some (generally) agreed-upon principles. Primary among those is that children develop in predictable ways, however, exactly how that is experienced is unique to the individual. A second primary agreed-upon principle is that the environment matters because children learn by dealing with it, but adults can play more or less active roles in shaping the nature of the environment. A third principle is that children learn by making choices and experiencing consequences, but parents can help them anticipate choice points and consequences that are likely to be harmful in the long-term. These philosophies lead parents to make different choices as children age through the early preschool and school-age years. I have drawn on three sources in understanding early development. Marilou Hyson and Heather Biggar Tomlinson (2014) review the crucial early years (birth to 8). George Morrison reviews early childhood education in preschool through grade 3. Nel Noddings (2018) provides a guide for philosophy of education through elementary school, and (as a STEP Director and

professor) emphasizes going beyond the standard curriculum to foster student-teacher relationships.

Try to Understand the Major Philosophies of Education and Use Your Favorite(s)

The major philosophies of education are legion. To oversimplify, we can break them down into three categories. One category leans toward teacher-centered methods. Another leans more toward centering on students. The third category is focused more on society.

Philosophies leaning toward teaching methods and direction.

Essentialism assumes that people and things have essential characteristics that are generally innate and stable with time. It is the leading approach to public education in the United States. It teaches basic skills that have been proven over time to be needed for a child to succeed in society. *Perennialism* focuses on the teaching of great works. Those historically great ideas are seen as being as meaningful today as when they were penned and thus serve as the basis for current thinking.

Philosophies leaning toward student learning. In contrast, four types of educational philosophies focus on learning by students (rather than teaching by elders). *Progressivism* suggests that developing the student's moral capabilities is more important than mere content, though content is needed to think and act morally. *Humanism* is about helping students reach their fullest potential. *Existentialism* assumes that each person is unique, thus education must value and explicitly take individual differences into account. Therefore, the objective of education is to enable every individual to develop his unique qualities, to harness his potentialities and cultivate his individualities. *Constructivism* focuses on ways to cognitively shape students' worldviews.

Socially-focused philosophies of education.

Reconstructionism suggests that education is the way to solve social problems by reconstructing malleable worldviews. Students are encouraged to envision their future, to question essentialist-influenced beliefs, and to act in ways that can bring about their envisioned, socially responsible future. Social reform is a major target of education. *Behaviorism* seeks to cultivate, reward, and cue behaviors

that benefit society. It focuses on environmental shaping because behaviors are seen as largely a product of the environment, not the person.

Who cares? You are likely not a professional educator so deciding whether you are an essentialist, social constructionist, or reconstructionist is not applicable. (I confess it is not that relevant for me either.) But it is helpful to think through some of the issues without feeling the need to endorse a particular theory or even knowing the names of the theories. So, you might see forgiveness as a skill that children can learn. That's an essentialism view, but whether you call it that doesn't matter. You can still teach the skill to your child. And you probably want to teach your child because you want your child to be a person of good character (progressivism) that is uniquely his or her own (existentialism). Furthermore, you want your child to be able to make responsible decisions by questioning some of the "cultural givens" and make responsible decisions that benefit others, not just themselves (reconstructivism and behaviorism). It doesn't matter to us in the day-to-day parenting what we call our

philosophy, but it is helpful to know how we think learning should take place so we can try to promote it.

Understand How Specifically to Teach Forgiveness

Numerous people have developed interventions to teach forgiveness—mostly to adults and adolescents. Two have dominated the research literature with adolescents and adults—the REACH Forgiveness model (Worthington, 2020) and the Enright Process Model (Freedman & Enright, 2020). The content covered in the two models is similar but not identical. Differences are largely due to packaging. The models also have been focused on different goals.

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss how effective treatments are using the idea of an “effect size.” Sorry for the brief digression, but let me say a word about “effect size.” An effect size is a “standardized” measure of how effective a treatment is compared to a control condition. We’ll usually use Cohen’s *d*, which is similar to Hedge’s *g*. The *d* (or *g*) tells how many standard deviations a treatment is better than the control condition to which it was compared. So, to help you interpret the meaning of the Cohen’s *d*’s that I’ll describe, let me put it in perspective. The most effective

treatment of depression is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). If a person underwent weekly CBT for a half year, the d would be about 1.25 compared to not undergoing treatment (Cuijpers et al., 2013).

REACH Forgiveness. The REACH Forgiveness model is largely a psychoeducational and public health model. That is, it is aimed at people with all sorts of hurts and offenses. It doesn't matter the injustice, people can use the REACH Forgiveness model. It produces—on the average—increased forgiveness, reduced depression and anxiety, increased flourishing, and increased general ability to forgive as a disposition.

All but two of its 35 randomized controlled trials (RCTs) have been done with adults or teens (Worthington, 2020). In a meta-analysis, Rapp et al. (2022) examined 20 studies targeted specifically at either pre-adolescent children or teens. Two REACH Forgiveness articles targeted teens and used 6- or 8-hour psychoeducational groups to teach and apply the method. They showed it to have an effect size of $d = 0.29$. (Remember, the example I gave earlier. This amount of gain in forgiveness is about one-fourth the gains for 26 hours of individual psychotherapy of CBT for depression ($d = 1.25$).

The REACH Forgiveness model has been specifically targeted to three areas with adults and teens—specifically using it with Christians, in couple therapy and enrichment, and for promoting self-forgiveness. For adults, a 6-hour group usually produces an effect size of $d = 0.4$. The difference between how teens and adults were effected is not statistically meaningful.

Christian REACH Forgiveness.

There is a specifically Christian adaptation (available without cost as a DIY workbook or as a psychoeducational group protocol, see www.EvWorthington-forgiveness.com), and there is a secular version (also available without cost from the same website). Several studies have shown that the specifically Christian-adapted approach works with Christians, and several other studies have shown that the secular approach also works with Christians just as well as the Christian-adapted approach (Rye et al., 2005). That is because Christians who seek to forgive tend to consult Scripture, pray, and try to forgive regardless of whether the intervention explicitly tells them

to or not. The REACH Forgiveness model has more research on it than any other psychoeducational approach.

REACH Forgiveness DIY workbook for global public mental health.

A DIY REACH Forgiveness workbook has been studied in a large study (Ho et al., 2023). Almost 4,600 participants in five countries (i.e., China, Indonesia, Ukraine, Colombia, and South Africa) completed the workbook trying to forgive all sorts of hurts from traumatic wounds of war to feeling snubbed by a friend. The DIY workbook took about 2.5 hours to complete. The philosophy is to fit with the global mental health objective of making health-related interventions widely available at affordable cost. That brief REACH Forgiveness DIY workbook is available without cost in English, Spanish, Chinese, Ukrainian, and Indonesian, able to reach 2/3 of the world's population in their first language (see <https://reach.discoverforgiveness.org>). The overall effect size for all sites was $d = 0.52$ for reduced unforgiveness, $d = 0.22$ for reduced depression, $d = 0.22$ for reduced anxiety, $d = 0.28$ for increased flourishing, and $d = 0.38$ for increased disposition to forgive.

Numerous moderate-sized studies.

REACH Forgiveness groups have also been shown effective in moderate-sized randomized controlled trials (from 150 to 250 participants). Both groups and DIY workbooks have been effective, with DIY workbooks perhaps being somewhat more effective.

REACH Forgiveness in intensive psychotherapy.

REACH Forgiveness has been tested in intensive psychotherapy only twice—with adults diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (8 hours of group psychotherapy; $d = 0.93$ averaged across five forgiveness measures) and with community adults seeking group psychotherapy for mental health disorders (12 hours of group psychotherapy; $d = 0.77$ averaged across two forgiveness measures).

It has not been studied with pre-adolescent children. The public mental health (adult) version has been tested with early, middle, and late adolescents. It has worked similarly with adolescents as with adults. It has been adapted for parents (Kiefer et al., 2010).

Enright's process model. Enright's process model for adults has focused mostly on forgiveness therapy, involving small samples but intensive work with people who have severe difficulties forgiving. His approach has more research on forgiveness therapy—that is, targeted interventions intended to be used primarily in psychotherapy—than does the REACH Forgiveness model (Freedman & Enright, 2020), which has only a couple of studies with such people. Enright has published some psychoeducational group intervention studies with adults, although far fewer than with REACH forgiveness. However, Enright's psychoeducational model has worked in those studies.

Enright's process model for children.

Importantly for this article, Enright has specifically adapted his process-model treatment for children (for a meta-analysis, see Rapp et al., 2022). It has been tested in nine small studies and has had an effect size in those studies of 0.66. It has been tested with children in several cultures.

Enright's story-based model for children.

Enright developed a story-based educational intervention to promote forgiveness in children (for a meta-analysis, see Rapp et al., 2022). It has been tested in nine studies with an effect size of 0.27.

Caution from the meta-analysis on forgiveness interventions with children.

In the 20 studies with children, Rapp et al. (2022) found a strong effect for age of the child as a moderator. This means that eight-year olds had a mean effect size of only 0.18, regardless of which of Enright's programs they experienced. But by age sixteen, the mean effect size was 0.66 regardless of which program they experienced (Enright's two programs and REACH Forgiveness). Basically, early, middle, and late adolescents seem to respond similarly to adults, but young children (elementary school or younger) were less responsive to forgiveness education.

Inferences from the research on forgiveness across the age span.

For formal forgiveness treatments, then, we would have to conclude that the REACH Forgiveness model and Enright's process model are

complementary to each other. Choose Enright's process model for intensive psychotherapy investigating the areas Enright has targeted and for forgiveness education with pre-adolescent children. For adolescents, both models work reasonably equally. For general public mental health intervention, choose the REACH Forgiveness model either in DIY workbook or psychoeducational group format—although Enright's model has enough research supporting it also to be considered an evidence-based practice.

In this article for parents, I unfortunately do not have the space to devote to Enright's two educational models—the process model or the story-based model. I have spent my time on the REACH Forgiveness model, which is more attuned to public health and public mental health widespread application. My apologies to Bob Enright, and I include his website for those interested (<https://internationalforgiveness.com>).

Reactive Teaching about Forgiveness

Often adults can observe as the children try to work their differences out. Children often learn more when they work out minor differences themselves than when an adult steps in with a forceful

solution (forceful because the adult is physically bigger and has more authority). But when one or both children act unsatisfactorily—like hitting or taking a toy by force—the adult can intercede. There are two things to consider. First, the adult wants to teach the children how to resolve conflicts. Second, because the adult waited until some unsatisfactory action occurred, there will perhaps be a good reason to teach about forgiveness.

Having just observed a wrong being done, the adult will want to deal with forgiveness first. You children need to have proper behavior scaffolded by the adult. That is, the adult is hopefully building a structure of reconciliation (Worthington, 2003), involving a reproach (i.e., the wronged party asks the offender for an explanation of why the offense was created), an account by the offender (i.e., the offender tells why), and victim's response to the account.

Reproaches are verbal (“Why did you do that?”) and non-verbal (child cries and acts hurt, provoking an explanation). For adults, the best reproaches paint the offender as usually having positive attributes, use I-language, do not accuse, speak in concrete terms rather than generalities, take responsibility for not

understanding the interaction, and ask for help by requesting clarification. “Usually, you are thoughtful in remembering our special days (e.g., positive attribute). I was surprised (e.g., I-language, accept responsibility for not understanding) that our anniversary passed without you having a card or present or special meal (e.g., concrete events). Can you help me explain (e.g., request for help and clarification) what went on?”

Soft reproaches encourage the person to give an account. The account can be a denial (e.g., “I didn’t do wrong. In fact, he did.”), a justification (e.g., “He hit me first [so I was justified in hitting him]”), an excuse (e.g., “Yes, I hit him, but people have been picking on me all day and I just couldn’t take any more”), or a concession (e.g., the CONFESS acronym is a good example). Concessions are usually good accounts in that they contribute toward reconciliation rather than continued hostilities.

Once a concession is made (which you’ll recall involves taking responsibility for wrongdoing, apologizing, and making amends), the child who was hurt can respond to the request, “Can you forgive me?” The response can be “no,” which usually continues

hostilities, or perhaps “yes, I forgive you” which dampens conflict. But more likely feelings are mixed (even it young children where this is being scaffolded). The child might say, “I forgive you” because that is the parent-pleasing (or punishment-avoiding) response, but might feel like, “I’ll get you back later.”

In employing our stress-and-coping-theory-of-forgiveness analysis, we see that the socially compliant but inwardly defiant child does not feel that the injustice gap has been sufficiently narrowed to permit a sincere response of decisional forgiveness (e.g., the intention to foreswear retaliation and treat the person as a valued and valuable person) and certainly has not had enough time for emotional forgiveness. If the parent can read the non-verbals, the parent can take steps to include other ways to reduce the injustice gap. Perhaps the parent can help the child establish more of a sense of fairness or justice, or can help the child accept and move on.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided concrete age-related suggestions for helping children three through twelve learn to practice forgiveness. The major emphases have been on establishing a warm,

principle-informed relationship with the child, attending to how the parent models forgiveness, having a practical theory to work from (I recommended stress-and-coping theory), having a model of forgiving and reconciling (I recommended the REACH Forgiveness model), and staying attentive to the child and the child's relationships as he or she ages. There is no single best way to promote forgiveness in your child. But you can help develop a child of character (Baehr, 2017; Lerner, 2019)—not just a forgiving child but one attuned to virtue—by applying the principles in this article.

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