



The Journey of Forgiveness: How to Teach Your Children

Forgiveness is a concept that can be challenging to understand and put into practice, especially for children. Just like you teach most skills, starting early and using repetition are keys to success. Forgiveness is no exception.

When children are able to learn these skills, it will become ingrained within them, which will help them to be able to move forward in life.

Dag Hammarskjöld, winner of the Nobel Peace prize and Secretary to the UN wrote, "Forgiveness is the answer to the child's dream of a miracle by which what is broken is made whole again, what is soiled is again made clean."

Many adopted and foster children who have been adopted from the foster care system and some orphanages have histories that include being "broken" and "soiled," as Hammarskjöld says. Forgiveness gives them the opportunity to look to the future and make "clean" their past.

The facts of their past remain, but their future can still be influenced with opportunities to make positive choices. As parents, you can slowly help them let go and move on.

David Pelzer, author and survivor of one of the worst cases of abuse in California's history, wrote in his third book *A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and*

Forgiveness that "the answer for all victims of abuse is compassion and forgiveness."

When we allow our children to live without forgiving others, it affects their physical, psychological, and spiritual lives.

Forgiveness can be simply the decrease in negative thoughts, feelings, and actions toward another. As you continue to talk about and practice forgiveness, there will be a gradual increase to more positive thinking, feeling, and acting which lends to healthier children who become healthier adults.

**"Cause that's what
friends do!
They forgive
each other!"**

**—Donkey,
from the movie, *Shrek***

Forgiveness Skills

The following are seven tips to teach and coach your children in forgiveness. The point is to start with everyday situations and gradually translate those to more serious events in your children's lives.

1. **Forgiveness Takes Practice.** Talk about forgiveness in everyday. This makes it easier when bigger events happen that require forgiveness. Incorporate the use of the word "forgive" in your child's vocabulary. Saying, "*I'm sorry*" is valuable, but saying "*please forgive me*" or "*I forgive you for...*" is more meaningful.
2. **Help your kids learn the art of feeling sorry or to feel empathy for others.** Showing empathy towards others is truly a

Continued on page 2



6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
800-762-8063
info@coalitionforccyf.org

© 2010;
updated 2018

In partnership with:



learned skill. Empathy is the ability to see a situation from another's point of view or to "put yourself in their shoes." If your children are able to relate to how people who hurt them feel, then they will be more inclined to offer forgiveness.



Disagreements are part of life and teaching kids the value of communication early in life is important. Understanding that people have opposing views and

can still be friends will lead to better relationships.

Sometimes it may be best to have a trusting adult help with these conversations in the beginning. This doesn't mean there will be a compromise or change in view, but rather that children learn that they can disagree without hurting one another physically or emotionally.

3. **Validate your children's feelings.**

Feelings belong to us and no one can put a value on them or tell us not to feel a certain way.

Counselors use "I messages" which say how you feel and giving a reason. For example, say, "*I feel sad because I lost my place in line,*" rather than blaming the other person by saying "*you budged me.*"

Feelings are our own and no one should minimize them. Let your child feel angry, sad, or disappointed, but coach them in dealing with the situation, rather than in redirecting their emotions.

4. **Teach your children to be kind and caring for others.** Sympathy is the ability to support another person through a difficult time. Children who learn this skill are able to accept others' sympathy when they are having a difficult time. Everyone has value and is worthwhile—learning this helps you to forgive yourself in the future.

For example, Johnny told his mother that Nick was pushed down at recess and he helped Nick up. Johnny's mother tells him that she is proud that he helped Nick and thereby validates Johnny's choice to be kind and compassionate to others.

5. **Encourage your children to talk to the person who hurt them.**

6. **Teach your children that forgiving someone does not mean the hurt goes away.**

Feelings can take a while to heal. Forgiveness is a process and the starting point of moving on. It may take a while longer to not feel the pain of an offense or the pain may even always be there. And forgiveness also doesn't mean that they need to stay in a relationship with someone that has greatly hurt them.

7. **Teach your child these statements that encourage forgiveness.**

"I will try not to dwell on what you did wrong and instead I'll try to think good thoughts about you."

"I will try not to bring up the situation simply to use it against you."

This is very true for siblings who may need to forgive multiple offenses in the same week. Let each offense stand alone and be dealt with one at a time.

"I will try not to gossip with others about what you did."

Telling and

Continued on page 3



6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
800-762-8063
info@coalitionforcof.org

© 2010;
updated 2018

In partnership with:



retelling about a grudge will not lead to forgiveness, but will solidify feelings of hurt.

Forgiveness in Pop Culture and the Media

Concepts and examples of forgiveness occur in all kinds of children's books, movies, and television shows. Try to incorporate these examples to initiate discussions about forgiveness. If your child can relate to a character in a book or movie then they may be able to apply that action in life.

In the movie *Shrek*, for example, Shrek and Donkey get in a big argument because Shrek believes that Donkey was conspiring against him with Fiona.

Shrek is mean to Donkey and leaves him behind. Donkey is persistent (and a little annoying) about coming back into Shrek's life. He cannot understand why Donkey still wants to be with him. Donkey says, "Cause that's what friends do! They forgive each other!"



This is a great opportunity to talk with your children about friendships and forgiveness.

There are many more books and movies which relate to this topic as well. Forgiveness can seem like a overwhelming topic to teach your children, but if you start now it will be easier for your children to show forgiveness throughout their lives.

Books

Following is a list of books (some have been turned into movies) that have concepts of forgiveness in them.

- **Talk and Work It Out**, by Cheri J. Meiners, M.Ed.
- **Understand and Care**, by Cheri J. Meiners, M.ED.

- **Just Me and My Mom: A Little Critter Book**, by Mercer Mayer
Many books by Mercer Mayer have a forgiveness aspect to them. Little Critter seems to need forgiveness often in these books.
- **Sam and the Firefly**, by P.D. Eastman
- **Mama, Do You Love Me?**, by Barbara M. Joosse
- **The Kissing Hand**, by Audrey Penn
 - **Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse**, by Kevin Henkes
 - **Horton Hears a Who**, by Dr. Suess
 - **The Sneetches and Other Stories**, by Dr. Suess
 - **The Cat in the Hat**, by Dr. Suess
 - **Thidwick the Big Hearted Moose**, by Dr. Suess
 - **Franklin's Bad Day**, by Paulette Bourgeois & Brenda Clark
 - **I'm Mad**, by Elizabeth Crary
 - **Down the Road**, by Alice Schertle & E.B. Lewis
- **My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother**, by Patricia Polacco
- **Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire**, by J.K. Rowling
- **The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe**, by C.S. Lewis

Movies

- Many versions of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, including:
 - **The Muppets Christmas Carol**
 - **Scrooged** (with Bill Murray)
 - **Christmas Carol** with Jim Carey
- **Ice Age**

Continued on page 4



6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
800-762-8063
info@coalitionforccyf.org

© 2010;
updated 2018

In partnership with:



- **Shrek**

- Most Disney movies have themes of self-worth and forgiveness
- **Invictus**, the true story of Nelson Mandela and a rugby team that helped bridge South Africa's racial tensions due mainly to Nelson Mandela's insistence on forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't come easily for most of us. Some things that have happened to some of our kids seems almost unforgivable. But if you start by teaching your kids to focus on the smaller things that *are* more easily forgivable, you're well on your way to tackling the bigger things, all in good time.

This tip sheet was adapted from the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families' Forgiveness curriculum. © 2010



6737 W. Washington St., Suite 2353
West Allis, WI 53214
800-762-8063
info@coalitionforccyf.org

© 2010;
updated 2018

In partnership with:

