

The Impact of Using Children’s Literature to Teach 5th Graders about Forgiveness

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How children navigate their emotional world is critical to their life long success
Susan David, Emotional Agility (2016).

I have decided to stick with Love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.
Martin Luther King Jr.

“I’ve learned that anger is a natural feeling. It takes time to foregive. You don’t have to foregive right away. They don’t always apologize. Forgiveness is one step closer to healing. When you forgive you can put it in the past. You don’t have to be friends with the offender after. Apologize make forgiving easier. Forgiveness is made by the person who was hurt. If you want revenge, then you haven’t forgiven in your heart.” - response from a 5th grade student when asked what she learned and enjoyed about the forgiveness education

“I like forgiveness because it helps me learn how to forgive people. Before forgiveness I was mean and rude to people- I learned to forgive people. I had a lot of anger before but since you came here- I learned to control my anger and calm myself down!” – response from a 5th grade student when asked what he learned and enjoyed about the forgiveness education

“I like learning about forgiveness because before you came I was confused and I did not know how to forgive someone that hurt me but when you came I forgave the person and now we are friends. I’m glad you came because if it wasn’t for you I would still be mad at that person. Thank you for coming and helping all of us learn to forgive someone.” - response from a 5th grade student when asked what he learned and enjoyed about the forgiveness education

The above three quotes were written (as is) by three fifth grade students who received forgiveness education I taught in two 5th grade classrooms.

Recent statistics illustrate an increase in elementary school children dying by suicide (Dillard, 2018). Three nine-year old children took their own lives this past year and bullying was related to all three deaths. Hate incidents at school are increasing at alarming rates although most incidents of hate are not reported. Along with increases in suicide and suicide ideation, anxiety and depression in youth are on the rise (Dillard, 2018). Helping students develop empathy toward others is a key strategy in bullying prevention and intervention and according to a recent NY Times article (Brody, 2018), it is critical that we help kids develop empathy early in their lives. Social emotional learning programs that include a focus on empathy and regulation of emotions are being recognized as an important part of the school curriculum for all students

(Zakrzewski, 2014) and based on recent statistics, there is a need for more SEL programs in schools today. According to Cook-Deegan (2018), social-emotional learning (SEL) teaches the key attitudes and skills necessary for understanding and managing emotions, listening, feeling and showing empathy for others, and making thoughtful, responsible decisions. Research illustrates that including social-emotional learning (SEL) in the curriculum is good for both students and their teachers (Zakrzewski, 2014). Forgiveness education, with its focus on recognizing and validating students' anger as well as teaching students to express emotions in a healthy way, understand the perspective of others, recognize the humanity in all, and increase empathy and compassion, is one form of social-emotional learning that is currently being investigated by researchers (Enright., Knutson, Holter., Baskin, & Knutson, 2007; Freedman, 2018).

The forgiveness education described here was based on a quasi-experimental pre-test post-test design with two classes of 5th grade elementary school students attending a low-income school in a Midwestern community. There were approximately 25 ten and eleven-year old students in each class representing a diverse group of races and ethnicities. The forgiveness education curriculum consisted of 10 weekly lessons of 30 minutes in duration with two days of pre-testing and two days of post-testing and a pizza party on the 11th day before post-testing. Although all students received the forgiveness education, only the students who returned signed consent forms from their parents completed pre and post-tests (30 out of 50 students total - 16 students in one class and 14 students in another class). The forgiveness education was taught by the researcher and occurred in each classroom on different days of the week. The same weekly lesson was taught in each classroom and the forgiveness education curriculum was based on Enright's (2001) 20-unit process model. Selected children's literature was used to teach and illustrate forgiveness and related concepts to the students.

Certain principles from the chapter, "Helping Children and Adolescents Forgive", in Enright's (2001) book, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, guided the education. First, the idea that it is always the child's choice to forgive was highlighted. Second, the curriculum was developed with the understanding that children may not understand forgiveness in the same way as adults. Third, the point that forgiving and reconciling are not the same thing was emphasized. Fourth, the rationale for this education and research project was based on the realization that if children are going to learn about forgiveness they need to be educated about it and know that it exists as an

option as well as the knowledge that children learn more deeply when challenged and encouraged

Additional foundational principles guiding the education included the ideas that children need to understand that anger is a natural feeling after being hurt and that children's anger and other negative feelings have to be recognized and validated by adults. Some children may need help expressing their anger and hurt feelings in healthy and safe ways as they have been told by those around them and society that violence is the only valid response to anger.

The curriculum used in this education was organized into four phases as in Enright's (2001) 20-unit process model and is briefly described here. In *Phase 1, Dealings with Feelings*, we discussed coping mechanisms used when hurt or angry. Students shared how they cope with anger and hurt feelings and brainstormed positive and negative ways of expressing anger as well as how expressing anger has helped them and how it has hurt them. We discussed that anger is not good or bad but how we act on our anger that is considered good or bad. Students also shared situations that made them angry and were asked to draw a picture of themselves when feeling angry and not angry. In our discussion of anger and the importance of expressing anger in healthy ways we read, "*Sometimes I'm Bombaloo*" by Rachel Vail and "*When Sophie Gets Angry- Really, Really Angry....*" by Molly Bang. When discussing the dangers of holding onto anger we read, "*The Forgiveness Garden*" by Lauren Thompson and "*I am Extremely Absolutely Boiling*" based on the Charlie and Lola stories by Lauren Child.

In *Phase 2, Deciding to Forgive*, the concept of forgiveness was introduced and the goal was to help students learn what it means to forgive. We discussed what forgiveness is and what it is not. Students also wrote their own definitions of forgiveness. We discussed the consequences of seeking revenge and not seeking revenge as illustrated in the books and how one of the first signs that forgiveness is occurring is not wanting to seek revenge on someone who hurt you. We read the book, "*Spaghetti in a Hot Dog Bun*" by Maria Dismondy. We discussed whether doing a bad thing makes someone a bad person and what actions a person could take if they have done something wrong. Students shared examples of making amends and then we talked about how no one is perfect and we all make mistakes.

We also read, "*The Selfish Crocodile*" by Faustin Charles and Michael Terry and students drew pictures of what they thought forgiveness looked like. The fact that it is the child's choice to forgive or not was also discussed and emphasized as was the idea that forgiveness does not

mean one has to maintain a friendship with the offender. Children appreciated hearing that they did not have to maintain relationships with those that were hurting them but could still work on forgiving. To end this lesson, we played the game, Two Truths and a Lie with facts about forgiveness.

Phase 3 was the active “*Working on Forgiveness*” phase and lessons focused on seeing the offender with new eyes, trying to better understand the offender’s hurtful actions, recognizing that the offender is a person who has a heart with feelings, and feeling empathy toward one’s offender. We began by discussing and defining the concepts of inherent worth and inherent equality. Inherent worth was defined as the idea that everyone has self-worth and it does not need to be earned. Students were taught that everyone deserves respect because they exist as a human being regardless of their actions. To help students understand the process of inherent equality we read the book, “*Let’s Talk about Race*” by Julius Lester. The message of this book is that underneath our skin, we are all the same. Students were asked to think about how if we take off our skin, we all have the same bones underneath; implying we are all human beings who deserve respect. No one group is better than another because of their skin color, ethnicity, religion, parents’ job, etc.

We focused on the idea of surrendering the right to get even and discussed the difference between revenge and justice. Students wanted to make sure that those who hurt them would not be let off the hook for their actions. We had a long conversation about bullying and why bullies bully and how being kind to a bully can be hard and may not make sense but could possibly help the bully be nicer and change their hurtful behavior. We read the book, “*Each Kindness*” by Jacqueline Woodson, and talked about the power of being kind. Students shared how it felt when they were treated with kindness and when they treated others with kindness.

Students learned the meaning of empathy when we read the book, “*Stand in My Shoes: Kids Learning about Empathy*” by Bob Sornson. Kids gave their own definitions of empathy and discussed a time when they felt empathy for someone or someone showed empathy to them. We read the book, “*Enemy Pie*” by Derek Munson to illustrate how sometimes our view of someone is incomplete or inaccurate. This book helped students to expand their view of the offender. Students were asked to give examples of situations where good people made mistakes and consider whether doing something bad meant someone was a bad person.

The last part of the curriculum was Phase 4, *Feeling Peace*, and included the ideas that no one is perfect and students have needed others' forgiveness in the past. We discussed the type of people students wanted to be and how the characteristics of being generous, kind and loving fit with a forgiving personality. We also discussed the benefits of forgiving and read the books, "*Rising Above the Storm Clouds: What It's Like to Forgive*" by Robert D. Enright and "*The Story of Ruby Bridges*" by Robert Coles. Students discussed how forgiving made the characters feel and the connections between forgiveness and Ruby Bridges' actions. Students stated that they felt more peaceful, good and less angry when they were able to let go of their anger and forgive. They also had better thoughts about the offender and showed more positive actions toward the offender as a result of forgiving. On the last day of the forgiveness education we had a pizza party and students worked in pairs to complete a True/False quiz about forgiveness. Students also wrote about what they learned and enjoyed from the forgiveness education. Many students said they did not want me to leave and expressed how much they learned about forgiveness.

Quantitative results illustrated that students increased significantly in their forgiveness toward a specific offender from pre-test to post-test as illustrated on the Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children. Students reported being hurt by friends, siblings, mothers and other students. Students also showed significant increases in their knowledge of forgiveness from pre-test to post-test as measured by the Forgiveness Conceptual Knowledge Questionnaire. No significant differences were found in students' level of anger from pre-test to post-test.

Qualitative results also illustrated that students both enjoyed and benefited from the forgiveness education curriculum. Specifically, when asked about what they learned and enjoyed about the forgiveness education, 14 students reported that the forgiveness education "**helped them learn to forgive someone**". Specific statements included, "I like forgiveness because in the future we will meet other people that we do not like but we still need to forgive them"; "Forgiveness has helped me forgive people I couldn't forgive in a long time"; "It helps me forgive people when they make bad choices"; and "I liked learning because I have learned how to forgive someone like I am trying to forgive someone right now".

Ten students reported that learning about forgiveness helped them know more about "**being nice and showing kindness to others**". Specific comments included, "Even if people you know are mean to you, you can still be nice to them. Don't be mean to others"; "It helped me

be nicer to my brother and friends”; and “You could always give a person that is mean to you a second chance because maybe the person that is being mean is having a bad day or got in an argument with their best friend”.

Nine students reported that they learned from and enjoyed “*the books read*” in the forgiveness education curriculum. Specific comments included, “I like stories we read. We read a lot of stories of forgiveness”; “We read fun books. Ruby Bridges she had no friends and she go to school with a happy face. I love the book”; “I like learning about forgiveness because she (the teacher/researcher) helps us forgive when we are mad and she read us a book that tells about forgiving others”; and “When Suzanne reads those books I think to myself and when I do I think I should forgive that person and when I come home, I forgive them for what they have done to me so I want to thank Miss Suzanne for helping me to forgive the person who hurt me.

Another nine students also reported that they “*learned more about bullying*” from the forgiveness education. Specific comments included, “Some bullies get bullied so they are letting their anger out on somebody else”; “People are just hurt inside when they bully”; Even though somebody is being mean to you, you could still forgive them”; and “When you have empathy you want to know how they feel and then you can put your feet in their shoes, and if you are getting bullied you can turn them into a friend by knowing how they feel”.

Seven students reported that they “*learned ways to calm down and let go of anger as a result of the forgiveness education*”. Specifically, students reported, “I have liked learning about forgiveness because it helps me get through my anger that has happened to me or the bad time that happened to me. Thanks for being here”; “Forgiveness is one step closer to healing. When you forgive you can put it in the past” and “Forgiveness has made me more calm and given me more chances in life instead of death”.

Six students stated that the forgiveness education taught them that “*we are all the same underneath*”. Specific comments included, “Everybody is the same on the inside”; “It doesn’t matter if you are a different religion or have different colored eyes because everyone is the same person underneath”; and “That we are all the same when we take our skin off. If you drop a rock in water all the little waves are people forgiving”.

Another six students reported that they “*learned about empathy*”. Specifically, they stated, “Empathy- giving forgiveness even if they don’t deserve it”; “She (teacher/researcher) said that you can always try to feel empathy for somebody because you don’t know what they

are going through at home”; “When you feel empathy you want to know how they feel and then you put your feet in their shoes and if you are getting bullied you can turn them into a friend by knowing how they feel” and “I like forgiveness because it taught us how to not wait till it’s too late to forgive. And to feel empathy for other people”.

Additional responses to the question asking what students learned and enjoyed about forgiveness education included, “*Forgiving is hard*” (four students); “*Enjoyed the treats*” (four students); “*Forgiveness is a choice*” (four students); “*You don’t need an apology*” (Three students); “*Forgiving takes time*” (three students); “*Don’t have to be friends*” (Three students); “*Forgive but not forget*” (Two students) and two students responded that “*Revenge is not part of forgiveness*”.

This study illustrates the potential of forgiveness education to improve elementary school students’ psychological well-being and interpersonal relations as well as the importance of including forgiveness education in the school curriculum. Students who learn how to forgive and decrease their anger in healthy ways will be less likely to be involved in bullying and other violent acts (Freedman, 2018). This research is encouraging and needs to be replicated with additional populations of children and adolescents.

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