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Bringing Peace to the Central City: Forgiveness Education in Milwaukee

The last 2 decades have seen a flowering of scholarly and applied work in the area of forgiveness, a skill important to the development of peaceful people and communities. We describe a forgiveness intervention designed to help children in a central-city environment. Such environments put children at risk for various psychological and social problems, including antisocial behavior, in large part because of the many forms of injustice experienced in such a context. Injustice often leads to anger, a key emotion in the development of psychological, interpersonal, and even academic problems. The current forgiveness education pro-

gram is showing promise in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and is now being implemented in inner-city Milwaukee.

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MANY CHILDREN IN AMERICA'S central cities are exposed to at least three factors that put their ability to maintain internal and relational peace at risk: (a) poverty, (b) racism, and (c) exposure to violence. These factors increase the likelihood that a child will experience problems in regulating emotional states such as depression, anxiety, and anger. Moreover, over time these negative emotions can give rise to psychological disorders and an inclination toward interpersonal violence in some children. Recent research shows that forgiveness can be an antidote to these negative experiences, especially excessive anger (Baskin & Enright, 2004; Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Based on such findings, we are designing and implementing a forgiveness education program in Milwaukee's inner city.¹

Inner-City America and Children's Emotional and Moral Development

The Effect of Poverty

Not surprisingly, growing up in a family that experiences chronic financial need is deleterious to children's development. In general, data demonstrate that poor children have more mental health problems than children who are not poor, regardless of whether we consider internalizing problems (such as anxiety or depression) or externalizing problems (such as antisocial behavior). These disadvantages increase in proportion to the amount of time a child spends in poverty (Bolger, Patterson, Thompson, & Kupersmidt, 1995; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Khlebanov, 1994; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Samaan, 2000). Analysis of a large, longitudinal database demonstrated that past and current poverty levels are positively associated with levels of depression and antisocial behavior in children (McLeod & Shanahan, 1996). In this study, number of years in poverty was positively related to increases in antisocial behavior over the late 1980s and early 1990s. Longitudinal research in Australia has suggested that poverty experienced in the first 5 years of life negatively affects the mental health of the young person even as late as adolescence (Spence, Najman, Bor, O'Callaghan, & Williams, 2002), whereas recent experimental work shows that children—especially boys—remaining in impoverished neighborhoods have worse mental health and academic outcomes than those who have been moved to more affluent areas (even if family income does not change; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, 2004).

The child raised in poverty is likely to be exposed to anger-producing interpersonal injury on several levels. First, by its nature, poverty creates a sense of injustice: The poor person has much less than one who is more affluent. Second, studies consistently indicate that parents living in poverty tend to be more depressed and display more negative parenting behaviors (e.g., rejection of child and excessive physical punishment; Brody & Flor, 1998; Brody, Murray, Kim, & Brown, 2002; Eamon, 2002); recent work has shown that mothers' psy-

chological health and parenting skills are partial mediators of poverty's deleterious effect on children (Brody et al., 2002; Eamon, 2002). Therefore, it is likely that many poorer children struggle with issues of injustice committed within the family. Finally, living in poverty increases the likelihood of being exposed to criminal acts. Forgiveness can play a protective role in promoting children's resilience and commitment to living peaceful lives, in part by helping children cope with the anger that naturally arises in such situations.

The Effects of Racism

Another risk factor potentially affecting many inner-city children is the experience of racism. A variety of studies demonstrate the link between exposure to various forms of racism and mental health among adults (e.g., Fang & Myers, 2001; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). It is not surprising that Klonoff, Landrine, and Ullman (1999) reported that, of several different predictor variables, racial discrimination (a) was the best predictor of physical complaints, anxiety, and overall psychiatric symptom scores and (b) remained a significant predictor of other mental health variables after other predictor variables were controlled.

One might ask, however, if such relationships between exposure to racism and psychological well-being, established with adult participants, hold for children as well. Although there is not much work in this area, the tentative answer is yes. Simons et al. (2002) reported a moderate correlation ($r = .31$) between depressive symptomatology and personal experience of discrimination among a large sample of African American children. This relationship remained positive and significant when caretaker reports of discrimination were substituted for child reports. Reported prevalence of discrimination at the community level was also significantly related to depressive symptoms.

Nyborg and Curry (2003) provided a more detailed picture of the processes underlying the link between exposure to discrimination and mental health among ethnic minority youth. Their research with African American early adolescent males demonstrated that the relationship between experience of various forms of racism (personal

and institutional) and various mental health outcomes (externalizing and internalizing symptoms as reported by self and parent and self-concept) was usually *fully* mediated by trait (pervasive, ongoing) anger. Research shows that forgiveness education is effective in reducing trait anger in particular (Gambaro, 2002).

The Effects of Exposure to Violence

The development of children is also threatened due to exposure to violence. Data from a subset of American cities show that 75%–90% of children in the inner-city have been exposed to or directly victimized by crime (Kuther & Wallace, 2003). Recent qualitative and quantitative reviews of psychological correlates of exposure to community violence have demonstrated that children who are exposed to—or in some cases only hear about—community violence are at risk for elevated levels of depression, anger, anxiety, sleep problems, behavior problems, and symptoms that parallel those of posttraumatic stress disorder (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992; Johnson et al., 2002; Kupersmidt, Shahinfar, & Voegler-Lee, 2002). The link between victimization and depression has been established empirically among African American youths in particular (Fitzpatrick, 1993); other empirical work with this subgroup has suggested that negative coping skills mediate the relationship between violence and mental health (Dempsey, 2002). A recent review (Kuther & Wallace, 2003) made a strong case for the negative impact of direct and indirect exposure to violence on African American children's sociomoral development; the argument can probably be extended to children of other ethnic groups as well. Not surprisingly, academic problems are also common and may well be caused at least in part by the emotional consequences described earlier (Garbarino et al., 1992; Schwartz & Gorman, 2003).

The Importance of Targeting Anger

Given the multiplicity of injustices children in the inner city face, it is reasonable to assume that

anger is a relatively common experience among them. Recent evidence suggests that anger interferes with adequate solution of the two main developmental tasks of childhood: establishing positive peer relationships (Sullivan, 1953) and achieving academically (Erikson, 1968). Anger is linked to aggression in general and, in particular, to reactive aggression (Arsenio, Cooperman, & Lover, 2000; Price & Dodge, 1989; Smith, Furlong, Bates, & Laughlin, 1998; Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). Reactive aggression involves responding with hostility and defensiveness to another's behavior. It can be contrasted with proactive aggression, which is unprovoked and instrumental in nature. The data show that children who demonstrate reactive aggression are at risk for poor peer relationships and a variety of other social and psychological problems (Price & Dodge, 1989; Waschbusch, Willoughby, & Pelham, 1998); this is also true of children who are angry but not necessarily aggressive (Arsenio et al., 2000; Eisenberg, Pidada, & Liew, 2001; Fabes & Eisenberg, 1992). On the other hand, correlations between proactive aggression and peer status, or other indicators of adjustment, tend to be not significant or even positive (Waschbusch et al., 1998). Although less well documented, some evidence suggests that anger may be negatively related to learning and academic achievement (Boekaerts, 1994; Gambaro, 2002; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002).

Our work in forgiveness education is based on the conviction that anger reduction is the fundamental salutary effect of forgiveness, and that a decrease in anger leads to less depression and anxiety and to stronger academic achievement and more peaceful social behavior. We propose this chain of events based on several sources of evidence. First, the thorough review by Enright and Fitzgibbons (2000) of empirical and clinical data on forgiveness and mental health concluded that anger reduction was the key component of the beneficial impact of forgiveness on mental health. Second, some correlational data show that children's problems with anger regulation predict internalizing symptoms better than difficulties with regulating sadness, suggesting that when the child experiences comorbid negative emotional states,

anger may be primary (Zeman et al., 2002). These strands of evidence suggest that reduction of anger is critical to children's successful navigation of appropriate developmental tasks, including establishing positive relationships. The finding that middle childhood seems to be a critical time for learning to regulate anger (Brown, Covell, & Abramovitch, 1991; McCoy & Masters, 1985) makes forgiveness education in the schools especially appropriate.

Interpersonal Forgiveness

The concept of forgiveness. Our research group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) has pioneered work in the psychology of forgiveness over the past 18 years. Conceptually, forgiveness is defined as follows:

People, on rationally determining that they have been unfairly treated, forgive when they willfully abandon resentment and related responses (to which they have a right) and endeavor to respond to the wrongdoer based on the moral principle of beneficence, which may include compassion, unconditional worth, generosity, and moral love (to which the wrongdoer, by nature of the hurtful act or acts, has no right). (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 29)

A definition more amenable to psychological study construes forgiveness as overcoming negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors directed at an offender and developing positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors vis-à-vis the same (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991). Before beginning empirical work on the topic, our group thoroughly reviewed philosophical work on forgiveness, which makes clear that forgiveness is offered from a position of strength (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1991). Forgiveness does not make one weak or vulnerable; it should be confused neither with condoning (e.g., ignoring or subtly approving) an offense, nor with reconciliation (reestablishing a relationship with an offender). Forgiveness does not preclude moderate, limited expressions of anger or a search for reasonable redress of injustice. Because forgiveness is a spe-

cific personal response to injustice and because harmful reactions to injustice appear to be at the root of some unhealthy psychological and relational patterns, it follows that a forgiveness intervention should be appropriate in a context where such negative experiences prevail.

Our group's work demonstrates that the process of forgiveness can be broken down into 20 units (see Table 1). Individuals need not progress through all units in order but may flow between units as they forgive. These units can be generalized into the *uncovering phase* (admitting the fact of the offense and experiencing its negative consequences), the *decision phase* (feeling a need for change and deciding to forgive), the *work phase* (trying to see the offender through different eyes and with a softened heart), and the *deepening phase* (finding meaning and purpose in the offense and experiencing the benefits of forgiveness).

The concept of unconditionality. As elaborated later, our research group has developed a variety of interventions that assist people in forgiving offenders. One of the key social-cognitive processes in these interventions—including the one being implemented in Milwaukee—is what we term *unconditionality* (Enright & the Human Development Study Group, 1994). Unconditionality is the understanding that all persons are equal at some level, regardless of personal characteristics (e.g., skin color, socioeconomic status). This understanding is based on the Piagetian concept of identity: the intellectual understanding that $A + 0 = A$, or that something unessential added to the first value does not alter it. (Piaget's famous conservation tasks demonstrate this principle: Pouring water from a short, wide container to a tall, narrow container is the "0" component, whereas the volume of water is the "A" component.) Unconditionality arises from this basic cognitive skill of identity and then leads to a belief in the moral principle of inherent worth, the conviction that persons are in essence equal, despite varying psychological characteristics (including behavior). Offering forgiveness involves acting on this social-cognitive understanding and the moral principle of inherent worth that springs from it.

Table 1
The Phases and Units of Forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000, p. 68)

Uncovering phase

1. Examination of psychological defenses
2. Confrontation of anger; the point being to release, not harbor, the anger
3. Admittance of shame, when this is appropriate
4. Awareness of depleted emotional energy
5. Awareness of cognitive rehearsal
6. Insight that the injured party may be comparing self with the injurer
7. Realization that oneself may be permanently and adversely changed by the injury
8. Insight into a possibly altered just world view

Decision phase

9. A change of heart/conversion/new insights that old resolution strategies are not working
10. Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option
11. Commitment to forgive offender

Work phase

12. Reframing, through role taking, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context
13. Empathy and compassion toward the offender
14. Bearing/accepting the pain
15. Giving a moral gift to the offender

Deepening phase

16. Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process
 17. Realizing that self has needed others' forgiveness in the past
 18. Insight that one is not alone
 19. Realization that one may have a new purpose in life due to the injury
 20. Awareness of decreased negative affect and, perhaps, increased positive affect, if this begins to emerge toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release
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Note. The material in this table is explained for the general public in Enright (2001).

Experimental research on forgiveness interventions. For 15 years, our group has been designing forgiveness interventions for use with various populations. Interventions implemented with such groups as survivors of sexual abuse (Freedman & Enright, 1996), college students in conflict with parents (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995; Lin, 1998), substance abusers (Lin, Mack, Enright, Krahn, & Baskin, 2004), mentally ill criminals (Chapman et al., 2001), and terminal cancer patients (Hansen, 2002) demonstrate that forgiveness interventions typically decrease negative psychological experiences such as depression and anger and increase positive psychological characteristics such as hope and self-esteem. A recent meta-analysis (Baskin & Enright, 2004) showed that the average effect size on mental health measures for such interventions implemented with groups is .59 of a standard deviation,

and for those implemented with individuals—1.42 of a standard deviation.

More recently, scholars in our group have been implementing forgiveness programs with young adolescents. Gambaro (2002) found that forgiveness intervention with especially angry adolescents was more effective than a Rogerian-based support group in reducing various forms of anger and improving attitudes toward school and quality of interpersonal relationships. These findings were maintained at follow-up 9 months later, when Gambaro also assessed school grades and detentions. Students participating in the forgiveness intervention were significantly better on these measures as well. Park (2003) implemented a forgiveness curriculum in Korea with female adolescents who were aggressive victims of peer abuse and found that intervention participants demonstrated less anger, delinquency, aggression,

and hostile attributions than did participants in two control groups. Gains were maintained at a 6-week follow-up, when the intervention group also showed significantly more empathy than the others.

Pilot of forgiveness education in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The manual-based forgiveness intervention we are implementing in Milwaukee schools is also being piloted on a small scale in Belfast, Northern Ireland. During the 1st year of implementation, anger dropped significantly more in children in the experimental group than in children in the control condition. This effect was especially pronounced for children who were extremely angry at the outset of the project; these children also demonstrated less depression at posttest than their counterparts in the control group. In addition, program children demonstrated significantly greater increases than control children in prosocial touching behaviors (e.g., hugging) over the course of the intervention.

A Forgiveness Curriculum for Milwaukee

In this section, we describe the general content of our school-based intervention with students in Milwaukee. Our 1st year within 13 first-grade classrooms commenced in the 2004–2005 academic year. All of the classrooms were in alternative (private) schools within the central city. We randomized the classrooms to an experimental (forgiveness education) and control group (no forgiveness education) with pretest and posttest evaluations. Dependent measures include each child's level of forgiving someone who hurt them unjustly, levels of anger and depression, interaction patterns with other children in the school setting, and achievement and conduct information gleaned from school records.

Besides first grade, we plan to have forgiveness curricula in third grade, early middle school, and early high school. The point is to have increasingly more complex ideas about forgiveness introduced over the years so that, at the end of high

school, the students will have an opportunity to deeply understand the concept of forgiveness and to make informed choices about its relevance within their own lives.

Throughout our manualized intervention for first-grade children, we are targeting a particular aspect of children's social-cognitive development: reframing (Unit 12 in Table 1), in which the child understands that all people, even those who are unfair, have worth. Through our manual, children are and will be taught about inherent worth of all people and to act on this insight by displaying the moral qualities of moral love (acting more out of a concern for the well-being of another than for oneself), kindness, respect, and/or generosity to those around them, including the ones who have hurt them. These five elements (reframing for inherent worth, moral love, kindness, respect, and generosity) are the focus of the first-grade program. In the program we are careful to emphasize the distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. A child does not reconcile with an unrepentant bully, for example. These elements are key in the work phase of the model of forgiveness presented in Table 1, which has been the crux of all forgiveness interventions conducted to date.

To emphasize the aforementioned five elements, we have a three-part curriculum. The first part simply introduces these five concepts outside the context of forgiveness through the story-medium of Dr. Seuss's books. Part 2 introduces these five concepts again, but this time *within the context of forgiveness*, using stories again by Dr. Seuss. Part 3 introduces these five concepts within the context of the *child's own attempt to forgive someone*.

The third-grade manual will go into greater depth in linking the moral principle of beneficence to forgiveness, which will be illustrated through more advanced literature such as *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Williams, 1958) and *Rising Above the Storm Clouds* (Enright, 2004). The outlines for the middle school manual and beyond are still being developed and therefore are not discussed here.

Throughout the curriculum, the teachers make the important distinction between *learning* about forgiveness and *choosing to practice it* in certain contexts. Children are always free to try or not try

forgiveness in response to their own personal hurts borne out of unfair treatment. In our experience in Belfast to date, children willingly try forgiveness when they are free to choose the person who was unfair to them and the event that each child considers to be unfair. The child's own classroom teacher delivers the curriculum. Prior to the commencement of the program, we hold a 1-day workshop for participating teachers in which we introduce them to the basic concepts of forgiveness, hand out the curriculum manuals, and discuss any questions or concerns. After the workshop, we are in close contact with each teacher through phone, e-mail, and visits to the school as needed. To us, it is important that the child's own teacher, rather than our research group, impart the concepts to the children to ensure cultural and religious sensitivity regarding the nuances of forgiveness.

Concluding Thoughts

Children in America's inner cities are faced with injustice on personal, institutional, and systemic levels. Anger arising from such experiences contributes to psychological and social conflict. Our forgiveness curriculum serves as *remediation* for children already suffering from excessive anger and its consequences and as *prevention* for all children against the development of further psychological and relational problems related to toxic levels of this emotion. As a result, children participating in forgiveness education should have the knowledge and skills to embody peace in their own lives and eventually to promote it within and between persons and communities.

Our vision is to give children in violent communities enough time to learn so deeply about forgiveness that it is as natural as breathing. Having learned well the process of forgiveness in childhood, these people as adults may be better equipped than their forebears to see the *enemy* as a genuine human being worthy of respect. Is true peace ever to be realized without such a perspective and ethical responses based on that perspective? Forgiveness within individuals' hearts and minds may change communities that have not known peace for many decades. In other words,

forgiveness education, though it has immediate benefits of improved emotional health, may have even wider benefits as more psychologically healthy adults are able to sit down together for mutual benefit as well as gain to the entire community. Forgiveness has rarely been a part of the peace movement. Perhaps it is time to change that for the sake of the children and the future health of entire communities.

Note

1. Demographically, Milwaukee is a microcosm of U.S. at-risk populations. Milwaukee's 1999 poverty rate (21.3%) exceeds those of nearby major cities such as Chicago (19.6%) and Minneapolis (16.9%; Milwaukee Department of City Development, Long Range Planning Division, 2003, p. 140). This snapshot hides the marked deterioration the city has experienced over the past 30 years. The most recent longitudinal analyses have shown that Milwaukee's poverty rate nearly doubled from 1970 to 1990 (Levine, 1998). African American Milwaukeeans have been hit particularly hard: Their poverty rate is about two times the rate of European Americans (Levine, 1998). In fact, Black poverty rates are higher in Milwaukee than in any other city in the north central United States (Levine, 1998). Regarding racial issues, 18% of Milwaukee urban area residents identify themselves as African American, and 7% identify as Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Other ethnic minorities and people of mixed ethnic background are also present but constitute a minimal percentage of the population. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to estimate that ethnic minorities constitute about 30% of the Milwaukee area population. Regarding community violence, crime statistics show that, between 2001 and 2002, arrests for violent offenses in the state of Wisconsin increased by 1.4% (Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance, 2002), whereas the nearby city of Chicago saw a decrease of 1.6% in arrests for similar crimes over the same period (Index Crime in Chicago, 2003). Of course, not all criminal acts in Wisconsin are committed in Milwaukee, but the clear majority of some types of crimes are. For example, 149 of the 196 murders reported throughout Wisconsin in 2001 were committed in Milwaukee (Milwaukee Police Department annual report, 2001; Wisconsin Office of Justice Assistance, 2002).

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