

THE COURAGE TO FORGIVE: EDUCATING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CHILDREN ABOUT FORGIVENESS



A Social Emotional Learning/Character Education Teaching Guide for Children Ages 9-12

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***The Courage to Forgive:
Educating Elementary School Children about Forgiveness***

How children navigate their emotional world is critical to their life long success.

Susan David, Emotional Agility (2016)

The three quotes below were written by three different fifth grade students who received forgiveness education taught in two 5th grade classrooms. They were asked to respond regarding what they learned and enjoyed.

“I’ve learned that anger is a natural feeling. It takes time to forgive. You don’t have to forgive 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. Apologies make forgiving easier. Forgiveness is made by the person who was hurt. If you want revenge, then you haven’t forgiven in your heart.”

“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!”

“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 forgive 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.”

Overview

This curriculum was written for school educators, counselors, and homeschooling parents to use with their 4th and 5th grade students, as a form of social-emotional learning and/or character education. This curriculum can also be used by religious education leaders and by educators in afterschool programs. The goal of this curriculum is for students to learn about forgiveness, including what it is and is not, how to forgive, contexts appropriate for forgiveness, and benefits of forgiveness, in order to deal with anger and other negative feelings after experiencing a deep and unfair hurt or conflict with another person. Although this curriculum was written specifically with 4th and 5th grade students in mind, it can be used with older (middle school students) or younger students, as activities can be modified as necessary. Adults may also find this curriculum helpful in their understanding and practice of forgiveness. **There are 16 lessons included in this specific curriculum that are approximately 45 minutes in duration.**

Some lessons may be longer than others as some lessons include two books to read and multiple activities. If the educator thinks there is too much material for one lesson, they can easily divide it into two or more lessons, as there is a choice of activities that the educator can choose for each lesson. More details about the curriculum are included in the content below.

Including forgiveness education in the school curriculum is somewhat new and because there are many misconceptions surrounding forgiveness, it is important to define forgiveness as well as discuss general guidelines surrounding forgiveness prior to describing the lessons. To be most effective when teaching this curriculum, it is important for the educator to understand why children need to learn about forgiveness at a young age and recognize the benefits of teaching forgiveness. It is highly recommended that the educator read through this entire curriculum before beginning instruction.

Why Students Need to Learn About Forgiveness

The increase in school shootings, bullying, violence, and discrimination experienced by children and adolescents underlines the need for education that helps students cope with trauma and deep hurt, both of which can result in anger, anxiety and depression. According to Baskin & Slaten (2010), “anger itself is not intrinsically unhealthy, but can become unhealthy when it is at chronically high levels and is associated with a deep hurt that remains with a person psychologically” (p. 161). Children’s anger within and outside the classroom setting is a serious national and international problem (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011; Enright, Knutson-Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007; Freedman, 2018). Recent statistics illustrate an increase in elementary school children dying by suicide (Dillard, 2018). For example, Dillard reports, that in 2018, three children, each only nine years of age, took their own lives due to bullying.” Hate incidents at schools are increasing at alarming rates although most incidents go unreported. Along with increases in suicide and suicide ideation, anxiety and depression in youth are on the rise (Dillard, 2018). Angry and hurt children who cannot understand their feelings often inflict anger upon others, or deny it until it erupts (Blake & Hamrin, 2007).

More mental health resources are definitely needed in our schools to help struggling students (Dillard, 2018). Forgiveness education is one form of social-emotional learning that has proven effective in reducing anger and increasing well-being in children and adolescents.

Forgiveness education focuses on recognizing and validating students' anger, as well as teaching students to express emotions in a healthy way, understand the perspective and humanity of others, and practice empathy and compassion toward others (Enright et al., 2007; Freedman, 2018). It is almost impossible to go through life without experiencing hurt, and knowing how to forgive gives students the opportunity to choose love and kindness over anger and hatred. As humans, we all make mistakes, and at some point, during our lifetime, we will either need forgiveness from someone or be in the position to offer forgiveness to another person. Learning about forgiveness gives students the knowledge and power needed to ask for forgiveness or grant it. Practicing the virtue of forgiveness rewards the forgiver, the forgiven, and society at large.

This curriculum can also be used as another resource to help individual children who have anger related to a deep hurt or conflict, and to more generally help all children learn about forgiveness. However, it cannot and should not replace direct counseling or therapy for students who are experiencing clinical levels of anxiety, depression, or suicidal thoughts or behavior.

Research demonstrates that increases in forgiveness are associated with increases in empathy, compassion and perspective taking (McCullough et al., 1997). Research also illustrates that learning about forgiveness at a young age can lead to improved psychological well-being, including decreases in anger, depression, and anxiety and increases in feelings of hope and self-esteem, and improvement in academics and relationships (Enright et al., 2007; Freedman & Enright, 1996, Freedman, 2018; Freedman & Zarifikar, 2015).

Results of the forgiveness education program taught for four years in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and conducted by Robert Enright and the International Forgiveness Institute (IFI), show that 75 percent of the teachers implementing the curriculum observed that students decreased in their level of anger. Seventy-one percent of teachers observed that as a whole, students improved in their academic achievement as a result of learning about forgiveness, 93 percent of teachers thought the students became better people, 84 percent of teachers found their classrooms functioned better because of the forgiveness curriculum and 92 percent of teachers reported that the school had shown improvements because of the forgiveness education (International Forgiveness Institute, IFI, <https://internationalforgiveness.com/curriculum.htm>). Past students who have received this curriculum reported more willingness to forgive in the future as a result of learning about it as an option (Freedman & Chen, in progress).

Forgiveness is more complicated than people realize. It may not be the same notion of forgiveness preached by one's parents or religious leader. It goes beyond just saying the words, "I'm sorry" or "I forgive you." By teaching students about the psychological process of forgiveness, we are helping them develop healthy ways to express feelings, understand the perspective of others, and practice empathy and kindness. Doing this early in their development serves as a form of prevention for many of the negative consequences that result from holding onto anger, as illustrated above. According to Lisa Damour (2020), psychological health is not about being free from emotional discomfort but about having the right feeling at the right time, recognizing one's feelings, and being able to bear the unpleasant ones. Thus, when we help students to deal with the negative emotions, we are helping them understand and cope with emotional discomfort. By doing so they are becoming more resilient and psychologically healthier.

It is hard for students to forgive if they don't know about forgiveness or see examples of it. The children's literature used in this curriculum illustrates what forgiveness looks like, what's involved in forgiving and the impact of forgiveness for both the characters who do the forgiving and those who receive it. The prevention of emotional and physical health problems is critical for the overall well-being and success of both individuals and society.

Introduction to Curriculum:

While students are educated about the process of forgiveness and what it looks like, they do not necessarily have to forgive a specific individual during this education. Research illustrates that comprehensive social-emotional learning curriculums available for purchase are often expensive, complex, and not culturally relevant to all students (Prothero, 2019). Having social emotional lessons that can stand alone, be easily taught, and done so in small chunks offers teachers, counselors and other mental health professionals flexibility in using this content. Instructions for each of the 16 lessons are thorough and detailed. Lessons may be revised and modified depending on the developmental level and age of students. Although multiple activities and discussion prompts, as well as homework, are included in each lesson, teachers can choose to use the activities that best fit their group of students or develop other activities based on the needs of the students and their most crucial issues.

Professionals who use this curriculum don't need to be experts in forgiveness, as the information necessary to use the curriculum is explained in this introduction to the curriculum and in each lesson. Almost every lesson includes at least one children's book illustrating a concept to focus on during that lesson. Curriculum leaders can also use these lessons with small groups of students or individual students who may benefit from more direct instruction about forgiveness as suggested by the framework of Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). MTSS uses evidence-based instruction specifically matched to students' needs.

(<https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework>). This curriculum can also be used as a bullying prevention and/or intervention program (Skaar, Freedman, Carlon & Watson, 2015). Appendix C includes frequently asked questions about forgiveness and the answers, for teachers to refer to if necessary to answer students' questions or read beforehand for more information, as the questions and responses offer a thorough summary of forgiveness and what it is and is not.

One major benefit of this this specific SEL curriculum is that forgiveness and forgiveness education isn't a topic the majority of children and adolescents will learn about in any formal instruction. Many students in the first author's college class on interpersonal forgiveness write about how they wish they had the opportunity to learn about forgiveness at a younger age. Usually after situations of interpersonal hurt or conflict, children are left to deal with their anger and hurt feelings on their own.

Messages from society often focus on "an eye for an eye" or alternately, "to get over one's hurt quickly with no discussion of one's pain and hurt feelings". In addition, perpetrators of hurtful and harmful actions are often forced to apologize before they have had time to reflect upon their actions, why they were hurtful and/or feel truly remorseful. Victims are told to accept the apology, whether or not they have actually forgiven.

Educating students about forgiveness and related concepts when they are young gives them an alternative to revenge, denial and/or suppression of feelings after experiencing a deep hurt or conflict. As Battaly (2015) argues, it is difficult for students to develop virtues like open-mindedness if they don't know what open-mindedness is or what it looks like in different situations. The same can be said for forgiveness. Unless students learn about forgiveness and see it modeled in different situations, it will be difficult for them to choose to forgive and develop a forgiving disposition. Providing students with specific examples of characters who show kindness and model forgiveness offers them a new way to think about handling conflict and

interpersonal hurt, as well as another lens to recognize and view individuals who have, or may in the future, hurt them.

This curriculum may also prove professionally and personally beneficial to the teachers, counselors, and other school professionals who use it. Many adults have misconceptions regarding forgiveness and what it is and is not, how to go about forgiving, and benefits associated with forgiving. People commonly think that an apology is required before forgiving (it is not), that forgiveness automatically leads to reconciliation and forgetting (it does not), that forgiveness is the same as excusing and condoning (it is not), and that anger has no role in the process of forgiveness (it does). Adults who learn about forgiveness through online classes on forgiveness, forgiveness therapy, or workshops/presentations on forgiveness, frequently remark how much their understanding of forgiveness has improved and how much their willingness to forgive has increased (Freedman & Zarifikar, 2015).

Certain principles from the chapter, “Helping Children and Adolescents Forgive”, in Enright’s (2001) book, *Forgiveness is a Choice*, guide this education. First is the idea that it is always the child’s choice to forgive. Second, the curriculum was developed with the understanding that children may not understand forgiveness in the same way as adults. Third, there is an emphasis on the fact that forgiving and reconciling are not the same thing. Fourth, the rationale for this education and curriculum is based upon the realization that if children are going to learn about forgiveness, they need to be educated about it and know that it is an option. In addition, children learn more deeply when challenged and encouraged.

As stated above, this curriculum was written with 4th and 5th graders in mind, although it may also be appropriate for younger elementary or middle school students. For comprehensive curricula starting in Pre-K and going through 12th grade, please check out Dr. Enright’s curriculum guides available at the International Forgiveness Institute (IFI) website at <https://internationalforgiveness.com/shop.aspx?c=1204&k=Curriculum-Guides>.

Definition of Forgiveness

The definition of forgiveness frequently referred to in the literature on forgiveness is, “Forgiveness involves a willingness to abandon one’s **right** to resentment, negative judgement, and negative behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the **undeserved** qualities of compassion, generosity, and sometimes even love toward him or her” (Enright & the

Human Development Study Group, 1991; North, 1987). The words in bold illustrate that one has a right to feel resentment and other negative feelings as a result of the hurt they experience, and that the offender, because of his or her hurtful actions, doesn't necessarily deserve the forgiver's compassion and forgiveness. A definition more easily understood and applied is that forgiveness involves a decrease in negative thoughts, feelings and behaviors toward an offender and perhaps, over time, a gradual increase in more positive thoughts, feelings, and sometimes behaviors occurs (Enright et al., 1991).

Both definitions are represented in this curriculum. Forgiveness is often criticized because people believe it is associated with excusing, condoning, forgetting, remaining in a hurtful relationship, and/or a lack of justice. In reality, forgiveness occurs after one recognizes and admits that he or she has been deeply hurt, and thus, forgiveness does not involve excusing, condoning or a forgoing of justice. Forgiveness does not mean we tolerate abuse or stay in a hurtful relationship. However, this aspect, for children, is not always in their control. Any type of abuse discovered during the teaching of this curriculum should be reported to the appropriate authorities and discussed with a school counselor/psychologist. We also don't necessarily need to tell the offender we have forgiven. Sometimes it is not possible, as the offender has moved away or died. Sometimes it is not safe as the offender has not admitted to the injury. Thus, we can forgive without telling the offender we have done so. Sometimes words are not necessary to show we have forgiven, as actions can speak louder than words, and saying the words doesn't always mean that we have truly forgiven.

The following twelve statements enrich the definition of forgiveness and make it easier to understand what forgiveness means and contexts associated with forgiveness:

- 1 Forgiveness is not for everyone. It is perfectly acceptable for someone to choose not to forgive. However, we don't want people to choose not to forgive because of misconceptions surrounding forgiveness or lack of education.
- 2 Forgiveness does not mean excusing, condoning, forgetting or reconciling.
- 3 Interpersonal forgiveness is between people, not between a person and an inanimate object. It does not make sense to talk about forgiving institutions, such as a hospital or school. We need to find an individual or individuals to forgive.
- 4 Forgiveness is always a choice one makes for themselves.
- 5 Forgiveness takes time and effort.

- 6 One does not need to be religious to be able to forgive.
- 7 Forgiveness follows a deep, personal, and unfair hurt, which might be psychological, emotional, physical or moral.
- 8 One of the first signs that forgiveness may be occurring is that the person no longer wants or seeks revenge.
- 9 The offender does not need to apologize in order for the injured to forgive and likewise, receiving an apology does not mean that one has to forgive.
- 10 The offender does not need to have intended the wrong; intent is not necessary to forgive.
- 11 Education about forgiveness and support during the process is helpful.
- 12 Forgiving can be transforming for oneself, others, and/or communities.

Summary of Forgiveness Education Curriculum

One appealing aspect of this forgiveness education curriculum is that it includes the use of children's literature to explore the topic of forgiveness. Twelve children's books are used in this curriculum, to illustrate forgiveness and the important concepts associated with forgiveness, such as kindness, empathy, healthy expression of anger, perspective taking, and the inherent worth of all. A thirteenth book, *Because of Winn Dixie*, is referenced, however, students do not read the entire book. One chapter from the book, relating to content in the curriculum is highlighted, and educators can show students the film, if they choose. Educators can also have students read the entire book if they want. Ideally, all books will be purchased for use with the curriculum. If purchasing the books is not possible, Appendix F includes multiple YouTube links of Read Alouds for each of the books and Appendix G includes a summary of each of the books in power point format.

Battaly (2015), in her philosophical analysis of how to help students develop intellectual virtues discusses the importance of exposing students to exemplars. She explains how doing so provides them with opportunities to absorb or catch the emotions of intellectually virtuous people. In this curriculum, the characters in the books serve as moral exemplars for the virtues of kindness, forgiveness, empathy and compassion. Six-year old Ruby Bridges' prayers for those who screamed racist insults at her when she was being integrated into an all-white southern elementary school, serves as a powerful example of showing kindness, even to those who are not

kind in return. Discussing these virtues with children and then using books to illustrate them, helps children become better at identifying forgiving actions, emotions and motivations, thereby making them easier to emulate. Students who have received forgiveness education with this curriculum frequently comment on how much they enjoy the books included in this curriculum (Freedman & Chen, in progress).

In a recent nationally-representative survey of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders, 75 percent of respondents reported that the social-emotional learning occurring in their schools was integrated into English/Language Arts instruction (Education Week, September 2020). The use of children's literature in this curriculum allows easy integration into an English/Language Arts curriculum or instruction. However, this curriculum can easily be integrated into other subjects as well.

Although the basic goal of this curriculum is for students to learn about forgiveness as a way to heal from an interpersonal injury or conflict, it begins by focusing on anger as a normal and natural emotion. A huge misconception about forgiveness is that anger is not part of the process. In this curriculum, anger is the first topic discussed, and it is recognized as a normal and natural feeling to experience after being hurt. We know that individuals cannot genuinely forgive, unless they express their hurt and anger. Children, especially, may need help expressing their anger in healthy and safe ways. Students will learn that it is okay to be angry when hurtful and upsetting things happen to them and also how to express anger in a safe and healthy way. When educators validate students' anger, it makes it easier for students to express their anger and then let it go. Reflecting on how holding onto anger can make one feel tired, anxious, and unhappy, children learn about forgiveness as an alternative to long-term anger and revenge. Students will learn that forgiveness involves acknowledging that a hurt occurred while simultaneously not dwelling too long in the anger and pain caused by the hurt.

Students also learn about perspective taking and what it means to put oneself in another's shoes to understand them better. Students are taught to "see with new eyes" (reframe) by looking for reasons behind hurtful behaviors. This is not done to make excuses for others' hurtful actions, but to better understand why they occurred. Learning about and practicing the act of perspective-taking helps students develop empathy for others, including those who have hurt them.

Understanding that all human beings have dignity, no matter their characteristics or actions, helps students recognize that all human beings have value and worth. Students will also

come to understand that doing a hurtful or bad thing does not necessarily make someone a bad person. Students will discuss how no one is perfect and everyone makes mistakes, including themselves. Learning about showing kindness, especially to those who are not kind to us is something known as radical kindness (Plante, 2013). Radical kindness can be difficult to show but can have a powerful ripple effect (Murphy, 2018). This type of kindness can extend beyond individual students and have long lasting consequences. Students will have opportunities to see the power of radical kindness and forgiveness in the books read to them.

Model Used in this Curriculum:

The curriculum used in this education is based on Enright's (2001) 20-unit and four-phase process model, which is briefly described below and illustrated in Appendix A.

Units 1–8 constitute the *uncovering phase*, as individuals get in touch with the pain and explore the injustice experienced. Working through these eight units allows those injured to experience both the pain and the reality of the injury and how it has affected them (Freedman et al., 2005). This is one of the reasons that forgiving requires strength and courage, as one has to have the strength to deal with the pain and anger from the injury.

Units 9–11 constitute the *decision phase*, a critical part of the forgiveness process in which individuals explore what is involved in the idea of forgiveness before making a cognitive commitment to forgive. It is also possible that they may make the decision to forgive even though they do not feel like forgiving at that moment or feel empathy, compassion, or any positive feelings for the offender when the decision is made.

These feelings will emerge during the *work phase* of the model (Units 12–15), which begins with reframing. Reframing involves seeing the offender with new eyes or in context, which often leads to empathy and compassion. Part of the work phase is accepting and absorbing the pain rather than passing it on to others or the offender; this is seen as at the heart of forgiveness (Enright et al., 1998). Owning the pain of one's injury means that the individual stands up and faces the pain rather than running from it or displacing it on others (Kaufman, 1984). When an individual deals with their pain, they are stating that the buck stops with them and are choosing not to pass their pain onto anyone else.

The *outcome (deepening) phase* comprises the last five units in the model, as those injured realize that as they give the gift of forgiveness to the offender, they experience healing.

Forgiveness will be affected by the severity of the injury and the relationship between offender and victim before the offense (Enright, 2001).

The model used in this curriculum is a developmentally appropriate version of Enright's 20-unit model (described below), for elementary school students (See Appendix B). Like Enright's 20-unit model, it is divided into four phases:

- **Phase 1, Dealings with Feelings**, focuses on the healthy expression of feelings related to being hurt, with an emphasis on coping mechanisms students use when hurt or angry, how it is normal and natural to feel anger, what the healthy expression of anger looks like, and the realization that holding onto anger is tiring and unhealthy.
- In **Phase 2, Deciding to Forgive**, the concept of forgiveness is introduced with the following goals: help students learn what forgiveness is and is not; what it means and looks like to forgive; the benefits of forgiving; and recognizing forgiveness as an option when hurt by or in conflict with another.
- **Phase 3** includes the active "**Working on Forgiveness**" phase and lessons focus on seeing the offender's and others' humanity. This involves taking the perspective of the offender, including trying to better understand the reasons behind the offender's hurtful actions, recognizing the inherent worth of all human beings (including offenders), and the development of empathy toward one's offender and others.
- The final part of the curriculum is **Phase 4, Feeling Peace**, and focuses on the theme that no one is perfect, people are made up of both good and bad characteristics, and how students themselves have needed others' forgiveness in the past. Characteristics of forgiving people (kind, empathetic, and generous) are described with a focus on characters from the books and discussions of what type of people students want to be.

Components of Forgiveness

The forgiveness model developed by Enright and colleagues (Enright, 2001) is based on five basic components of forgiveness that are used to guide this curriculum and help students when trying to understand the broader concept of forgiveness. These components are inherent

worth, moral love, kindness, respect and generosity (International Forgiveness Institute, 2007). They are the building blocks of this curriculum and are defined as:

Inherent worth - All people have deep worth because they are human beings and members of the human family. This deep worth cannot be earned nor taken away. It is an essential part of each person. Within the context of forgiveness, it is akin to the idea that we are to love the offender, but dislike the offense. As students learn that all people have deep worth (even following injustice), they will be developing an important foundation for forgiving. Recognizing the inherent worth of all individuals helps students see that all people are equal at a fundamental level, because they exist as human beings, despite their behavior or actions.

Moral Love - When we morally love someone, we love them unconditionally, despite their flaws. Certainly, someone who morally loves another can ask fairness of that person. Yet, the one who morally loves has the other person's best interest at heart. Moral love is not a selfish or self-centered love. Moral love underlies true forgiveness.

Kindness - When people are kind, they tend to be warm-hearted, concerned about the other person, and humane. People who practice kindness are laying the foundation for forgiving. Some people talk about the "change of heart" that occurs when someone forgives. The cold and stony heart becomes the warm and softened heart. Although it is easy to be kind to those who are kind to us, kindness matters most when we show it to those who are unkind to us. This is known as "radical kindness." As illustrated in several of the books, it is important for students to know that they can treat others the way they want to be treated, even if they don't receive that same consideration and treatment. Showing kindness to others, regardless of their actions, may lay the groundwork for someone to change their negative behavior and can have a ripple effect, reaching out and beyond what one can imagine.

Respect - When someone shows respect, he or she regards the other person as worthy. Some people think that respect must be earned. We believe, following the great philosopher Immanuel Kant, that people possess intrinsic value to such a degree that we should respect all persons. We

respect people, not because of what they do, but rather because of who they are. As children practice respecting all people, they make forgiveness easier to practice in the future.

Generosity - To be generous is to give abundantly. It is a gift-giving that surprises and delights the recipient. If children can learn to be generous, they will be in a better position to understand what it means to give a gift of forgiveness to someone who hurts them. We are generous when we forgive an individual who has not apologized or admitted to wrongdoing. By forgiving, we are giving a gift to the offender that they may not deserve because of their actions. We give it anyway and are generous when we do so. Although we offer our forgiveness, we do not necessarily continue a relationship with an offender who may still be hurtful or has not apologized for or perhaps even admitted to their hurtful actions.

Relationships Matter:

One important point worth emphasizing is that this curriculum will be most effective if taught by someone who has either developed a trusting and caring relationship with the students and therefore teaches the lessons with care and respect shown to all students. As Watson et al. (2019) point out, some students, because of their experiences and relationships, have not developed a trusting worldview and believe that others are hostile and do not have good intentions. For these students, content is not enough to improve their psychological well-being and set them on a positive life course (Watson et al., 2019). Building caring and trusting relationships with students who are angry, depressed, fearful, and/or anxious is important. The content is more likely to have a lasting impact if the educator is warm, caring, and friendly. In addition, teachers' own enjoyment and enthusiasm during teaching has been found to relate positively to students' enjoyment and engagement (Pekrun, 2009), which makes the content more meaningful to students and consequently, more likely to be practiced (Battaly, 2015).

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