

Waging Peace through Forgiveness in Belfast, Northern Ireland IV: A Parent and Child Forgiveness Education Program

Chad M. Magnuson

Liberty University

Robert D. Enright

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Becki Fulmer

Peacelines, Belfast, Northern Ireland

Kirstin A. Magnuson

Wyndhurst Counseling Center

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Correspondence should be sent to the first author at cmagnuson@liberty.edu; Department of Psychology; Liberty University; 1971 University Blvd; Lynchburg, VA, 24502

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Abstract

This study appraised the effects of a parent-led forgiveness intervention on forgiveness for parents and their third grade children (ages 8-9) in Belfast, Northern Ireland. In this study, parents in the experimental group (n = 5) used a curriculum guide to teach forgiveness to their children, while the control parents (n = 5) participated in art activities with their children. Statistical analyses demonstrated a significant increase in interpersonal forgiveness of an offender for parents who taught forgiveness to their child compared with the control group parents. Findings and future directions are discussed.

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A Parent and Child Forgiveness Education Program

In previous issues of this journal (Enright, Gassin, & Knutson, 2003; Enright, Knutson, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007), we proposed and tested a peace program aimed, in the short-run, at improving the mental health of children in Belfast, Northern Ireland. We found that children in grades 1 and 3 (primary 3 and 5) who participated in forgiveness education led by their classroom teacher experienced a statistically significant drop in anger compared to children in the control group. Furthermore, children in primary 5 reduced statistically significantly in psychological depression compared to children in a control group (Enright et al., 2007). The results with anger have been replicated in the United States in grades 1, 3, and 5 (Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Enright, & Knutson, 2008).

We have been interested in a new approach to peace that places forgiveness deliberately as a priority throughout the community, within schools, places of worship, and homes. The point is to allow people to learn about and practice forgiveness so that deep resentments, which can lead to prolonged violence, are reduced and therefore the violence may eventually be reduced across the community. Our approach to peace is a “bottom-up” or grass-roots approach in which we assume the following:

1. Conflict between people is directly connected to conflict within people. Excessively angry people start wars. It is certain that anger alone is not the catalyst to war; the point is that anger is an often ignored part of the process.

2. One person's internal conflict, let us call it resentment, has a way of infecting others, creating resentment within them until many in a social group are suffering from the malady of excessive anger that is allowed to grow within and be expressed outward toward others.
3. Even if economic and social reconstructions are effective in altering the infrastructure of a society, the inner world of the human heart, when resentment remains, can prevent true peace from being realized within a society. In other words, conflicts between people, which can lead to renewed war, are likely.
4. Forgiveness is not a substitute for programs centered on justice, but instead are complements to them.
5. Forgiveness, practiced over years in schools, families, and places of worship should be able to reduce or even eliminate the internal resentments. This should allow people to accept rebuilt infrastructures and live together in peace. In other words, forgiveness as part of postaccord societies (those that have signed peace treaties) may be particularly effective.
6. To be effective, forgiveness programs must have a clear definition of the term forgiveness and not confuse it with somewhat related but distinct terms such as excusing.
7. To be effective, the forgiveness programs must be sustained over a period of years to allow people to learn and then to incorporate the practice of forgiveness into their daily lives and to pass the learning and practice to their children.
8. Forgiveness education cannot be isolated to a few willing participants, but instead needs to pervade a society if that society is to change toward peace where war was once the norm. In other words, the assumption is that forgiveness must become part of the community, not isolated and individualized, if it is to aid peace initiatives.

As one step in advancing the agenda of point 8 above, we thought it was time to extend forgiveness education within the home, to see if parents might be able to forgive as they teach their children, who are already receiving forgiveness education in the school. If the parents can learn to forgive while they are teachers of forgiveness to their children, this may lead to more peaceful and psychologically healthier homes as the leaders in those homes, the parents, reduce resentments, forgive, and model forgiveness for their children.

At the same time, we were interested in whether this added dosage of forgiveness education for children, above and beyond the school instruction, leads to even more gains in their ability to forgive. Obviously, the school is not the only influence in a child's life. Parents, in fact, are another important influence on children (Laible & Thompson, 2007), and when the family environment remains unchanged, even the best school-based program will have a difficult time producing lasting psychological change for the children. Programs that involve parents show more promise than school programs alone (Horowitz & Garber, 2006). Since parents are major shapers of their children's values and healthy functioning in various life domains, including emotions and behaviors (Grusec & Davidov, 2007), a forgiveness education program delivered to children by their parents holds intriguing possibilities for lasting positive mental health and relationship change.

With these issues in mind, we trained parents to deliver a manualized forgiveness education intervention to their primary 5 (grade 3 in the United States) children and assessed its impact relative to an alternative treatment. In this brief report, even though we assessed other, secondary variables in the study, we focus on two primary hypotheses:

1. Parents who lead the forgiveness curriculum will show increased forgiveness compared with parents who lead the control condition.

2. Children who participate in the parent-led forgiveness curriculum will show increased forgiveness compared with children who participate in the control condition.

Method

Participants

Participants included 16 parents (8 randomized to the experimental, and 8 randomized to the control group) and their children in Primary 5 (P5; the U.S. equivalent of third grade) in Belfast for the 2008-2009 school year. Five families dropped during the course of the study, and the data for one parent/child pair were eliminated from analysis because of the parent's pattern of perseveration on some of the scales at post-test (for example, giving a rating of "2" for every item on a scale), leaving 5 experimental and 5 control families for delayed post-testing. Families were recruited from schools that have been participating in ongoing research and service projects through the University of Wisconsin – Madison.

Participants were blocked on child gender and school type. In the final sample, the experimental group consisted of 2 boys and 3 girls (all Catholic) and the control group was made up of 1 boy and 4 girls (4 Catholic and 1 Protestant). The children ranged in age from 8 to 9 years (M 8.3 years, SD .48), and parents ranged from 26 to 40 years (M 33.0 years, SD 5.31). Of the 10 parents, 9 (90%) were mothers and one (10%) was the father, 2 (20%) were married and 8 (80%) were single. All parents received a positive teacher recommendation on parents' literacy level (since books are an important part of the program and illiterate parents would not be able to read to their children) and no children had special academic needs (since children in special education or special literacy programs might respond differently to the intervention). All children involved in this study were receiving forgiveness education in the classroom from their P5 teacher in addition to this intervention.

Forgiveness Program Description

The *A Family Guide to Forgiveness Education* (FGFE; Knutson & Enright, 2008) curriculum is a fourteen-lesson manualized forgiveness education program designed for implementation at home by parents. Each lesson is meant to last about 45 minutes, and forgiveness is taught through story, family discussion, and activities meant to deepen understanding. For example, lesson one centers on the value of inherent worth, or the idea that all people have deep value that is an essential part of their nature. This worth cannot be earned or taken away, and it does not depend on abilities, attractiveness, health, group membership, wealth, or any external characteristic. After parents read the first three chapters of the book *Sarah, Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1985), the parent and child engage in several discussion questions, such as, “What gives people deep worth?” Finally, the parent and child participate in an activity wherein the parent gives the child a stuffed toy. Together, the parent and child consider the stuffed toy in light of the topic of inherent worth. For example, they explore whether the toy has worth because of its fabric or appearance. After constructing a “house” for the toy, the parent and child explore whether the toy has more worth now that it has a house. Further questions relate the concept of deep worth directly to the child’s experience.

Family Art Program Description

The placebo control condition, called the *Family Art Program* (FAP; Magnuson, 2008), is a fourteen- lesson manualized program consisting of shared art activities. The active control condition is meant to account for variables like parental attention, time spent with parents, shared activities, adult exposure, contact, teamwork, cooperation, parent preparation, parent effort, and parent training that could conceivably account for any positive impact from the forgiveness program. As an example, lesson four calls for parents and children to create a story book using

pictures from magazines. After the parent and child look through magazines together and cut out pictures they like, they make up a story that goes with the pictures. The parent and child glue the pictures on construction paper and write their story around the pictures on each page. Finally, they create a cover for their story book, staple it together, and discuss their favorite part of the story.

Parent Training

Parents who participated in the study attended either a forgiveness education workshop or a family art workshop led by a doctoral student in educational psychology and a licensed marriage and family therapist. The workshops, which lasted approximately two hours, were held at local schools, either during the day or after the school day had been completed.

Instruments

Parents' forgiveness. The Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI; Subkoviak, et al., 2005), which has been validated in six languages, is the most frequently used measure of forgiveness in published experimental research, with consistently high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98-.99$; Enright & Rique, 2000/2004). The EFI is made up of 60 items and contains three 20-item subscales assessing cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains of forgiveness toward an offender. The instrument begins with questions about an offense upon which the questions focus, and concludes with five construct validity questions regarding forgiveness. In this sample, typical hurts reported by participants included relationship issues with boyfriends or family members (e.g., negative comments by the significant other). Each response is rated according to a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Total forgiveness scores range from 60-360, with higher scores denoting greater forgiveness.

Children's forgiveness. The Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C) is based on the adult version of the EFI. The EFI-C consists of 30 questions that measure three domains (affect, behavior, and cognition); each domain contains a balance of five negative and five positive questions. The children in this sample typically reported interpersonal hurts from classmates or children in their neighborhood (e.g., a classmate called the participant a name on the playground). Responses to these questions are scored on a 4-point Likert scale: (1) *Yes*, (2) *A little bit yes*, (3) *A little bit no*, and (4) *No*. Thus, total scores on the EFI-C range from 30 (low forgiveness) to 120 (high forgiveness). Although this measure is somewhat new to the field, it has been used successfully with elementary school children in Northern Ireland with high reliability levels (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ in Enright et al., 2007).

Other measures. Participants completed other instruments as well, such as measures for anger, depression, and anxiety. These measures, which were not the central variables of the study, were not statistically significant, so they will not be discussed in this brief report.

Procedure

A total of five schools were identified for participation through conversations with principals. Letters were sent home from these schools to parents in September. Parents of the families who consented to participate in the study attended a two-hour workshop in mid-October to receive training in using the curriculum to which they were assigned (the FGFE or the FAP). The graduate student researcher and a licensed marriage and family therapist delivered this training. Materials (books, supplies) were distributed to the parents at this time as well.

Active consent was obtained through parental consent and student assent forms delivered prior to data collection. The parent/child pairs were randomly assigned, using a table of random numbers, either to the experimental or the control group. Trained research assistants

administered the instruments both before and after the program. Pre-test and delayed post-test (approximately one month following completion of the program) data were collected.

Intervention fidelity was checked through weekly parental evaluations throughout the course of the program for each condition.

Results

Pre-test and delayed post-test (one month after the intervention ended) data were coded and entered by a member of the research team. Spreadsheets were spot-checked to ensure accurate transfer of the data. All analyses were completed using the statistical software package SPSS Version 17.

Reliability

Cronbach's alphas were computed for the dependent measures. Both scales demonstrated high internal reliability: Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI), $\alpha = .99$; Enright Forgiveness Inventory for Children (EFI-C), $\alpha = .96$.

Analysis

First, pretest means were calculated for the dependent variables in each condition for children and parents. A between-group analysis of the pretest means revealed no significant differences between parent or child groups on the variables at the outset of the study.

For children, both the pretest experimental ($M = 89.4$, $SD = 33.9$) and control ($M = 89.6$, $SD = 19.9$) mean for forgiveness represent a moderate forgiveness score. At the delayed posttest, the experimental children gained, on average, over 10 points in forgiveness ($M = 100.0$, $SD = 10.7$), while control children remained virtually the same ($M = 90.2$, $SD = 18.6$). In the Enright et al. (2007) study with P5 children in Belfast, the experimental group experienced a significant gain in mean forgiveness score, from 68.22 at pretest to 86.51 at delayed posttest. Thus, it is likely that the

children have already done some development in forgiveness in the school setting, since the pretest means of both groups were higher than the posttest scores in Enright et al. (2007).

For parents, both the pretest experimental ($M = 282.2$, $SD = 60.6$) and control ($M = 277.0$, $SD = 92.0$) represent an above-average forgiveness score. At the delayed posttest, the experimental parents gained an average of 25 points in forgiveness ($M 307.2$, $SD 76.1$), while control parents actually decreased in forgiveness by 10 points ($M 267.0$, $SD 92.1$). A score of 307 is very high compared with previously published forgiveness interventions.

Since we were interested in individual change on each dependent variable, individual gain scores were computed for all participants following the calculation of pretest and delayed posttest scores. The directional hypotheses—that forgiveness participants would experience significant improvement in the dependent variables—call for a one-tailed analysis of each gain score. Thus, to examine group differences, we conducted a one-tailed t -test for each dependent variable. We found a significant between-group difference in parents' forgiveness scores, $t(8) = 1.9$, $p < .05$ (one-tailed), where parents who participated in the forgiveness condition experienced a significant improvement in their forgiveness level. The effect size for this difference ($d = 1.25$) was large by Cohen's (1988) standards. The between-group tests for children's forgiveness and other variables were not significant.

Case Study

For illustrative purposes, we will highlight parent-child pair 2 from the experimental group. Child 2's forgiveness score jumped an impressive 49 points from a low score of 54 to a moderate score of 103. Although child 2 showed no improvement in depressive symptoms (the child began the study in the 'normal' category), this child showed a substantial decline in anger. Parent 2 showed a 45 point increase in forgiveness from a moderately low score to an above-

average score. Although parent 2 increased a bit in trait anger to a relatively high score, this parent decreased in depression into the minimal category. Parent 2 showed no improvement in anxiety.

Discussion

This parent-led forgiveness education program was designed to complement the forgiveness education program already occurring in the classrooms in Belfast. In most of the dependent variables, there was no significant change. The important exception was parents' forgiveness. The parents who taught the forgiveness curriculum to their children experienced a statistically significant gain in their interpersonal forgiveness scores compared to parents who taught the art curriculum.

Parents' forgiveness

Indeed, the most interesting finding of this study is the significant gain in forgiveness for the parents who taught the forgiveness program. During the implementation, the parents did not work on forgiving anyone. Thus, the statistically significant finding shows an intriguing effect: as the parents taught their children about forgiveness, the parent improved in forgiveness. This finding is consistent with social learning theories that maintain that teaching a certain subject is actually one of the best ways to learn it. In this "doing" model of learning, when one enacts content—rather than passively receiving it—one is more apt to internalize the content. This is unlikely to be a spurious finding, given the hypotheses and the fact that forgiveness was the central variable.

The normative data on the EFI show that the overall mean is 256.55 (Subkoviak et al., 1995). The experimental parents in this study moved from a mean of 282.2 at pretest to a mean of 307.2 at delayed posttest. Thus, these parents who were already more forgiving than average

toward their offender moved to a very high level of forgiveness after teaching their children about forgiveness.

Implications for Peace

We noted earlier that the road to peace must necessarily pass through the human heart. This study showed that parents increase in forgiveness when they teach the concept to their children. This increase in forgiveness entails a decrease in negative thoughts, feelings, and behaviors toward a wrongdoer and an increase in positive thoughts, feelings and behaviors. As parents—the leaders in the household—decrease in their resentment towards hurtful others, we believe that a grassroots peace movement can emerge. As resentment decreases, hopefully so, too, will violence. Forgiveness education has made a positive impact in schools and, now, in the family as well. As forgiveness education stretches out into several domains (i.e., the school, family, and place of worship), we hope that the foundation for peace will be established.

Limitations

Sample size and characteristics. With a total sample size of 10, it was very difficult to detect differences between the groups. Furthermore, this group of parents (and children) is already at such a high level of functioning that an intervention such as this might not detect psychological differences between groups. To date, all published forgiveness intervention studies, whether with children or adults, had participants in need of psychological amelioration. The parents in this study all volunteered for this study and probably did so because they had the interest, the energy, and the psychological coherence to begin and complete the intervention. This fact makes the parents' forgiveness finding all the more credible.

Complexity of the concepts. Perhaps some concepts are a bit too difficult for children at this age in Belfast. One parent commented, "It was too hard to keep my daughter's attention . . .

it is a little too advanced for her age.” Another parent suggested, “I would try to use more simple wording to make the child understand. I had to explain a lot of the meaning and wording.” Yet another commented, “I would word the summary section a little more simply, making it easier to understand.”

Suggestions for Further Research

The finding that teaching forgiveness to one’s children can have a positive impact on one’s own forgiveness of others seems to indicate that this type of work merits further attention. In designing a similar study, the following recommendations could prove helpful.

First, an analysis of the therapeutic mechanisms of change would be appropriate. It is clear from the amassing forgiveness research that interventions to promote forgiveness are effective. A key question still remains: Why? Researchers in this field would do well to begin to pick apart the change process to identify the mechanisms behind the gains in mental health. Perhaps the key mechanisms lie in two main areas: 1) the cognitive shift in the reframing process where the individual sees the offender in a new light; and 2) the accompanying reduction in resentment that, in turn, leads to improved mental health. Knowledge of these processes would allow interventions to be more concentrated and targeted toward key areas. Similarly, an investigation of the proper dosage level for the intervention would help refine the program and make it more effective.

Second, this research could possibly benefit from larger sample sizes and other research designs. One option is a single-case design, grouping participants by parent-child cohort. Rather than looking at large-scale group outcomes, this design tracks an individual unit and notes changes over time. Another option is a regression-discontinuity design, where all subjects complete pretests and those who score lowest on the target measures receive the intervention.

The other half of the participants serve as the comparison group. Thus, this design, although quasi-experimental in nature, ensures that the intervention is delivered to those who need it most.

General Conclusion

This is the first known study to explore the effects of teaching forgiveness on the one who delivers the curriculum. We found that parents—although they simply taught forgiveness and related concepts to their children—increased significantly in their forgiveness scores. This finding has potential implications for therapy, specifically with families who might not visit a therapist’s office. If one can improve in forgiveness (and potentially other forgiveness-related areas like depression, anger, or anxiety) by teaching a short forgiveness program to one’s child(ren), this type of intervention could benefit parents who do not have the time, money, or interest in receiving professional help for past hurtful events. Certainly, this finding needs corroboration in future research. Nevertheless, it is a promising new avenue of mental health promotion and the possible advancement of peace in communities.

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