



Formative Parenting

Cultivating Character in Children

A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania

TEACHING FORGIVENESS

One day Jesus said that if a brother “sins against you seven times a day, and seven times a day turns back to you saying, ‘I am sorry,’ forgive him.” (Lk. 17:3-4) Jesus was speaking to adults but he may just as well have been speaking to children in a family.

Hurts come from varied sources. Easily children (and adults) feel left out, betrayed, cheated, overlooked, wrongly accused, discounted, violated regarding space or possessions, ignored, put-down, embarrassed, ridiculed, disrespected, used, or bullied. Because egos are fragile these slights fuel anger, defensiveness, standoffs, shutdowns, shutouts, and, perhaps, retaliation. These cause-effect dynamics occur at a single offense so what about multiple offenses? Forgiveness is more likely when the culprit expresses sorrow. But what about when the offender does not own up to responsibility? What about hurts that are never followed by the words, “I am sorry” or hurts that are repeated over and over again?

What is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is proactive. It is a freedom that you give to yourself to “let go” of the offense rather than keep it alive by ruminating over it. The result is that you grow happy, healthy, and whole. You admit that someone has offended you, you name it for what it is, you do not condone the wrong, but you make a decision to grow beyond it and to release the negative emotions associated with the person or event.

What are the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness?

When we hold onto a hurt, we let that event/person continue to hurt us over and over again. Un-forgiveness makes your own heart hard. Un-forgiveness spreads into general distrust of others. When you hold onto anger or hurt, you stop smiling and laughing. You cease to see the world around you with optimism. You isolate yourself. You go into a pity world of one. You cannot recognize and accept blessings that are right under your nose because you exist within an inner world of “I’ll show you” or “I’ll get even with you” or “I’ll punish you; I’ll make you pay!” or “You’ll be sorry!” By these kinds of thoughts/reactions, you actually continue to hurt your own self. Your soul shrivels up. You become bitter and life stops for you. Meanwhile, the offending person may be totally unaware of hurting you or worse, totally unconcerned for causing hurt. That person continues to be just fine while you are destroying yourself – emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Anger affects health.

Surely we have all heard the expression, “Forgive and forget” or the expression, “I can forgive but I will never forget!” The first expression requires thoughtful interpretation lest we mistakenly conclude that brainwashing is a component of forgiveness. The second expression fails to recognize that it is the essence of forgiveness to release the hurt from memories.

Forgiveness is a gift that you first give to yourself. Secondly it is a gift that you offer to the offending person who may or may not accept it. If the offender does accept your gift of forgiveness he/she can be converted and, possibly, be restored to your friendship. If the offender does not accept responsibility, he/she chooses to remain outside your circle of friendship but you release yourself from the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness. You liberate yourself to grow when you “let go” of the offense.

Ten Tips in Teaching Children How to Forgive

1. On days that you are in a good mood and rested you react differently to stimulus than you do on a day when you are irritable. Establish good **sleep routines and nutrition habits**.

2. We each have tender **pressure points** that make us more sensitive to feel hurt in situations that do not offend other people. For example, a tendency to feel ignored, exploited, unappreciated or superior. Grow to know yourself and use self-talk when tempted by feelings of hurt or anger.

3. Use **"I" Messages** to communicate in a respectfully assertive way.

- When... (State the behavior.)
- I feel . . . (State the feeling.)
- Because . . . (State the consequence.)
- Request (State your need.)

Example: "When dirty dishes are left on the table I feel taken for granted because I am left to clean up the mess that others make. Please show respect for me by clearing your meal space before leaving the table."

4. Use **"I" Statements** to express needs, feelings, wants, and desires. Example: I need you to turn the stereo volume down to "three" or "I feel invisible" or "I desire to complete my thought before hearing a response."

6. Whenever anger/hurt surfaces pray a **mantra** (aspiration) like: "My Jesus, mercy." "Mother of Good Counsel, counsel and protect me." "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in you." "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

7. Use a **PRAYER BOWL** to turn over to God a hurtful person/situation over which you have no control. Write the situation on paper, place it in the bowl, and ask God for the grace needed. Then "let go" of the situation.

8. **Reverse roles**. Put yourself in the shoes of the offender. What do you think is the reason behind the behavior? Rather than take it personally, consider the behavior as his/her struggle.

9. **Ground yourself**. Carry a small wooden cross or a prayer stone in your pocket. When hurt or anger press on your heart, touch the object and recall that God is with you.

10. Every time you think of the offender, pray this **personalized version of the Our Father**.

___'s Father, who are in heaven,
holy be Your name in ___.
Your kingdom come in ___.
Your will be done in ___
on earth as if s/he were with You in heaven.
Give ___ her/his daily bread.
All that s/he needs to sustain life.
Forgive ___ and help ___ to forgive others.
Do not put ___ to the test for s/he is weak like the
rest of us.
And please, deliver ___ from the evil one.
Let ___'s joy be in Your kingdom and power and
glory. Amen.

Food for Thought

"In all things be self-possessed. To let another person determine whether you will be rude or gracious, elated or depressed is to relinquish ultimately, your only true possession – self-possession." Ben Harris

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Mahatma Gandhi

"Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit." Peter Ustinov

"Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." Paul Boese

"Without forgiveness, there is no future." Desmond Tutu