

Teaching Forgiveness for Big Hurts

The abuse of nine-year-old Robby started immediately after Dad's girlfriend moved in. It got increasingly worse until Child Protective Services gave Dad an ultimatum—either the girlfriend had to go, or Robby would be placed in foster care. Dad chose the girlfriend. It would be an additional four years of trauma before Robby would return home.

There are plenty of studies that tell us that forgiveness is a potent tool for healing and has a multitude of benefits—but how do children and youth who have experienced unimaginable trauma find that healing? How do we, as caregivers, teach children about the benefits of forgiveness when they have been so deeply hurt by a parent, loved one, or other trusted adult?

The following are points to consider and strategies to apply in guiding conversations about forgiveness with youth in your care.

Forgiveness is about their own healing

Assure the child or youth that forgiveness is about helping them let go of painful feelings—not making those who hurt them feel better. Help them understand they don't owe the person who hurt them their forgiveness, nor are they responsible for their feelings. Explain that any shame or guilt is not theirs to carry. Be sure to

reinforce that what happened to them was not their fault and that they did not deserve what happened.

Acknowledge and validate their feelings

Often, children will have conflicted feelings about expressing anger toward someone who has hurt them—again, particularly if it was someone who should have been protecting them. Help them to give themselves permission to be hurt, angry, sad, or anything else they may be feeling. Stress that their feelings are a perfectly natural reaction to what they've experienced.

Those who are hurting can hurt others

If appropriate to the situation, help children understand that people who are hurting may unintentionally hurt others they love. This is especially helpful for

a child who is trying to reconcile their love for the person who hurt them with the hurt they caused. This does not mean they need to empathize with their abuser. It is merely a way of helping them make sense of being hurt by a loved one.

Destructive anger makes things worse

Although it is natural to feel anger toward those who have hurt us, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to express that anger. Lashing out or destroying property is not



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helpful. Likewise, anger turned inward, such as self-harm or other self-destructive behaviors, won't help. Help them understand and articulate their feelings without commentary or judgment.

Some constructive ways to let go of anger include strenuous physical activity, creating (crafting, drawing, building), or even problem-solving. Empower the child to identify what is making them angry or hurt and consider possible solutions.

Model forgiveness

Share a story of when you faced forgiving someone and walk them through your thought process and actions. You can also use opportunities to demonstrate forgiveness in real-life situations, such as when another driver cuts you off at school drop-off.

Empower them to control the process

The child or youth needs to be ready to forgive. Be supportive during that process. Pressing forgiveness before someone is ready can result in invalidated feelings, emotional distress, and delayed healing. As one seventeen-year-old said, "Everyone acted like it was so easy and automatic to forgive; it made me feel like what happened to me wasn't that big a thing." Let them know they have the right to decide if and when they want to forgive. It's also okay to choose not to.

Offer reassurance

Assure that the child or youth understands that forgiving doesn't mean the harm done to them is excusable and shouldn't have consequences. Also, it should be made clear that forgiving doesn't mean the person who hurt them should be allowed back into their life or given access to hurt them again. In fact, the person they are forgiving never needs to know they've been forgiven.

Seek professional help

Find a therapist or counselor with whom the child is comfortable. This can help create a safe space for children to work through their trauma and begin the healing process. For youth who are resistant to therapy, there are several creative alternatives for processing their complex feelings to find peace.

- Art Therapy—creative expression such as drawing, painting, or sculpting
- Music Therapy—creating or listening to music
- Equine Therapy—the bond formed with a horse can help teach trust and safety
- Therapeutic Writing—journaling, letter writing
- Dramatic Arts—roleplaying, storytelling, improvisation, and other theatrical techniques can help heal trauma

These therapies engage different parts of the brain that are not accessible through talk therapy alone. Feeling more in control of their emotions through alternative therapies, youth can be empowered to find peace and forgiveness.

Conclusion

It's important to note that forgiveness is a highly personal and complex process, even for younger children. While forgiveness has well-documented benefits—such as improved physical and mental health—it is not a one-size-fits-all approach to healing. It is also not required for healing to occur. Like any journey, it takes time, patience, and soul searching. And ultimately, some children and youth may find themselves unable to forgive. That's okay, too. Most importantly, caregivers create a safe and supportive environment where children and youth can grapple with their experiences and emotions and decide what path to healing is best for them.



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Resources

From the [Resource Library](#)

- *Helping Clients Forgive: An Empirical Guide for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope*, by Robert D. Enright & Richard P. Fitzgibbons
- *Red, Blue and Yellow Yarn: A Tale of Forgiveness*, by Miriam Kosman
- *A Terrible Thing Happened*, by Margaret M. Holmes
- *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing*, by Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D. & Oprah Winfrey

Tip Sheet

- [The Journey of Forgiveness: Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness](#)

Additional Resources

- [Forgiveness Factor](#)