

Forgiveness in the Family

Abstract

This article explores some practical ways to teach children about a healthy process of forgiveness and reconciliation. It starts by focusing on understanding God's incredible love and forgiveness for each person and looking at how parents can model forgiveness and set an example for their children. Then it leads the reader through a four-step process of forgiveness that can be taught to children using a variety of simple and creative learning experiences. These steps are:

1. Understanding God's love for each person, even those who have hurt us.
2. Reflecting on the experience of hurt, and how it has affected the person who caused the hurt, as well as the person who has been hurt. This is to develop empathy for each other's feelings.
3. Assessing the damage and considering how important it is to mend the relationship.
4. Developing a relational repair kit to give children the skills to forgive and mend the important relationships in their lives.

Overview

Forgiveness can sometimes seem mysterious or complicated, because God's forgiveness is such an incredible gift to us that it's beyond our comprehension. In order to simplify and demystify forgiveness I have developed a simple, four-step process to help explain the process to couples and families. Each of the four steps is accompanied by practical suggestions for helping adults and children to understand the forgiveness process and to put it into action in their everyday lives.

But before we can help our children learn about forgiveness, we need to reflect on what it means to be forgiven by God. We also need to model healthy forgiveness as parents and adults in our children's lives, which includes asking our children for their forgiveness. It is also vital to understand our children's emotional, physical, and relational needs, so that we can support them when they are struggling and create the optimum context for their positive behavior. Then we are in the best place to notice when they have intentionally disobeyed, and when a healthy apology and forgiveness process will help to mend the hairline cracks and fractures in our relationships with each other and with God.

Forgiving from the heart of God

The starting place for forgiveness is in the very heart of God, and our understanding of His loving character. When we experience His generous forgiveness towards us, we are inspired to pass that gift onto others. When we forgive another person, we are set free from the desire to take revenge against the person who has hurt or offended us in some way. When it is safe to

do so, forgiveness also paves the way towards a closer relationship, as we learn to understand each other better, work to repair the damage, commit to positive changes in behavior, and lovingly nurture an empathic relationship.

Before we can help our children to understand forgiveness, we need to experience God's amazingly lavish and loving forgiveness for ourselves. It is difficult to convey the wonder of God's gift of grace to others without having this personal and multi-dimensional awareness of His forgiveness in our own lives. God has already given us the gift of forgiveness; we just need to accept it. He longs for us to come to Him and experience the wonderful sense of being washed clean by Him and being given a fresh new start. He takes our sins away and loses them forever, so we don't have to be burdened and dragged down by the things we have done wrong. He wants to make sure there are no obstacles or barriers between us and Him, so that we can truly enter an unhindered, joyful and loving relationship with Him, free from fear, guilt, shame and embarrassment (Psalm 103, Psalm 51, Isaiah 1:18; 43:25; 55:7; Eph. 1:7).

Forgiveness in the family

Once we have experienced the magnitude of God's forgiveness in our own lives, we need to offer it freely to each other, especially in our homes. When we learn how to forgive our spouses well, we set a healthy example for our children. The four-step approach described in this article has helped many couples to navigate the choppy waters of forgiveness in their own relationships, and then with their children.

When parents practice generous grace in their couple relationship, their children can see, hear and understand what healthy forgiveness looks like. And when children experience the powerful forgiveness of their parents, it helps them to understand something of God's forgiveness and grace too. Solo parents can demonstrate forgiveness with other adults in their life, as well as with their children, to give them a living experience of grace. Every family can also choose to share powerful and inspiring stories of forgiveness with their children, from their own history, and from the incredible stories of forgiveness that are happening around the world.

Understanding children's behavior

Before we consider forgiveness, we also need to understand our children's behavior. It is important to differentiate between their mistakes, accidents, and developmental stages, and their willful and intentional wrongdoings. It is important not to punish or discipline our children for the things that are done because they are too young to understand what they are doing, not yet physically able to manage the task (like knocking over a glass on the table), or too young to assess the risk and understand the consequences of their actions. These are situations of parental responsibility, not children's misdemeanors, and it can be confusing and frightening

for them when we expect them to ask for forgiveness when they don't really understand what they have done wrong, and when we may have contributed to their crisis of behavior.

It's also important for us to check that we have met our children's physical and emotional needs. Are they tired, hungry, unwell, frustrated, afraid, confused or overstimulated? And what about our children's relational/bonding needs? Are they longing for some of mom or dad's attention? Do they need a warm hug and some lovely "time in" with us to make them feel connected and special? Have they been struggling with a difficult task or situation on their own, and they just want us to slow down and help them? Do they feel unsafe for some reason? These powerful experiences can flood a child's system and make it really difficult for them to manage their behavior well. As parents we need to take responsibility for not meeting the child's needs and do everything possible to put things right again.

The time when we do need to think about supporting our children through the four stages of forgiveness is when they have intentionally and willfully disobeyed or crossed a boundary. This is when they most need to accept responsibility for their actions and the hurt that they have caused to others. They also need to accept the responsibility of asking for forgiveness, offering it to others, and repairing their broken relationships.

Being a good example

Another important way that we can help our children learn how to forgive, is by apologizing to them, and asking for their forgiveness, when we have hurt and upset them, intentionally or unintentionally. When we show our willingness to recognize our wrongs, apologize, and ask for our children's forgiveness we set a powerful example for them to follow, and we make it much easier for them to do the same. Some parents are concerned that if they apologize to their children they will be seen as weak; but being able to apologize humbly and lovingly to others, and especially our children, is a sign of great maturity and strength (James 5:16).

Look out for signs that you may have caused hurt to your children. Maybe you shouted at them or responded angrily instead of patiently (1 Cor. 13:4). Maybe you hurt their tender feelings or shamed them (Rom. 12:10). Maybe you caused them to fear you (1 John 4:18), or you exasperated them (Eph. 6:4). Notice when your child looks sad, goes quiet, hides from you, and gently and warmly ask them if you have hurt them in some way. Bedtime is also a good time to check out if you need to apologize to your child, or if they need to experience your forgiveness for something that they did wrong during the day.

Here is a sample statement of apology that parents can use with their children. "All of us make mistakes, do things that are wrong, and hurt other people. Even parents. Today I hurt you by _____. That was wrong. I am so very sorry that I upset you (scared you, hurt you, etc.). Next

time I would like to do _____ instead. Please forgive me. What can I do now to help you feel better? Would you like a hug, a story, to go for a walk, to do something nice with me?"

Repair quickly

Just as God makes the first move towards us when we have sinned and need forgiveness, so we need to consider making the first move towards our children, of any age, when they need our forgiveness. Teens and children might be uncertain about how to repair the relationship with their parents, so the adults in their lives need to set an example and help them to repair the relationship.

Researchers at Penn University have discovered that when a teenager has been in conflict with a parent, as long as the relationship is restored, and a strong reconnection occurs before bedtime, then the teenager can recover fairly quickly from the event. But, if the relationship is still strained, cold, and hostile overnight, then the teenager is more likely to feel sad and anxious about what happened, and they may even become depressed¹. This experience is likely to be similar, or even more intense, in younger children.

Start small

Whenever we begin to learn a new skill, it's best to start small. Helping children to grasp the process of apologizing and offering forgiveness in the little, everyday hurts at home, will help them to develop the skills they can apply to bigger hurts later in life. So, look for good opportunities to help your children practice the skills that are described in this article. Coach them warmly and encourage them on their up and down journey of learning how to ask for, and how to offer forgiveness.

Four places of forgiveness for families and children

One way to illustrate the process of forgiveness, in a way that children can understand, is to think about the hurtful situation from four different places.

1. The first place where we need to experience God's forgiveness is in the very heart of God and His love for each one of us. He loves the person who has caused the hurt as well as the person who has been hurt. It is important for us to understand the generosity of God's loving forgiveness towards each of His children.
2. The second is in each person's shoes, so that we understand the effect of the hurtful experience on each person involved, whether they have been hurt, or whether they have caused the hurt.
3. The third place is where we look at the situation through a magnifying lens – to identify the damage done to the relationship in closer detail, and through a telescopic lens – to look at the future of the relationship.

4. The fourth place is in the mending kit, or the toolbox, where we look for the best way to repair the damage to the relationship.

First place – Understanding God’s love for everyone

We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), and, because He loves us, He freely forgives us, so that we can forgive others. In fact, He has already forgiven us, so we can go freely and safely to Him to receive the forgiveness that is already ours. We are forgiven even before we confess our sins, not because we confess our sins.

God loves each person equally. His love for all of His children is not dependent on what they do or don’t do. When we have been hurt by someone, God’s love is the same for the person who has been hurt and the person who caused the pain.

Love Hunt - Work together as a family to find as many objects as you can, in five minutes, that illustrate God’s amazing love. Tell each other why you chose your objects, and what they tell you about His love for each one of us.

Love-shaped Lenses - Purchase or make a pair of glasses for each person, with heart-shaped lenses (<https://www.firstpalette.com/printable/eyeglasses-heart.html>). Put on your heart-shaped glasses and imagine that you are looking at every person you see through God’s loving eyes, the way He sees each of His children. Talk about what you notice when you look at others with God’s love, rather than with your own distorted vision. How can you use these imaginary lenses to help you in the forgiveness process?

No escaping His love! - Take a long rope or string and lay it on the ground outside to make the biggest heart shape possible. Tie the two ends together to make a big loop. Have everyone stand inside the heart and tell them that this heart represents God’s love. Now ask everyone to hold onto the string as you move around, always keeping everyone inside the loop. Whenever you call out “Love!” work together to lay the rope or string in another big heart. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we are always inside God’s circle of love.

Psalms 103 - Read Psalm 103 together in a version that your children can understand easily. Explore it together so that you are filled with wonder for God’s love and generous forgiveness. Ask: Which verse do you like best, and why? What is the most important message in this Psalm for you today? Which verse is most about you? What does this Psalm tell you about God’s loving character? Ask younger children to help you create actions for the verses, and older children and teens could work with you to create a video or PowerPoint to illustrate the verses in the psalm.

Second place – Understanding ourselves and others

Once we have grasped God's equally amazing grace towards every person, even the ones who have hurt us, we are ready to explore the second place. This is the place where we grow to understand more about ourselves and the other person. This can be illustrated by two pairs of shoes, and we ask the questions what am I feeling and needing now, and what is the other person feeling and needing now?

Children often need some help to identify their feelings and needs. Help them by purchasing some cards with emotions written or drawn on them or make a set of your own. Use words like sad, disappointed, hurt, annoyed, angry, afraid, embarrassed, guilty, ashamed, stressed, frustrated, loved, happy, peaceful, etc. Make at least two sets so that your child can choose the words that describe how they are feeling and also choose some words to describe how the other person might be feeling. If you wish, you can actually place the words next to the real shoes of each person involved in the situation.

Then invite your child to think about what they might need to help them feel better, and what the other person might be needing. It is important to remind them that when people are hurting, they are more likely to hurt others, and sometimes we need to use empathy to look beyond their behavior and into their hurting heart and life. As Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," Luke 23:34.

Some of the things that people might need to help them feel better again are:

- Being accepted – especially when they have messed up (Rom. 15:7)
- Experiencing affectionate words and actions (Eph. 4:29, 32)
- Being shown warm and positive attention (Phil. 2:4)
- Being comforted (Rom. 12:15; 2 Cor. 1:3-5)
- Being encouraged (Heb. 10:24)
- Being helped or supported when they are struggling (Gal. 6:2)
- Being respected instead of being shamed (Rom. 12:10)
- Being kept safe when they feel afraid (1 John 4:18)

Study these ideas and verses and think about the times when people in the Bible used these ways to mend and build stronger relationships. Jesus used all of these ways to bless people who were hurting, broken, ashamed and guilty. Talk about the times when He related to others in these kind and loving ways, to help them feel forgiven by God.

Third place – Taking a good look at the relationship

Once we have spent time reminding ourselves of God’s love for each person and exploring the effect of the hurtful action on each person involved, it's important to look at the relationship through a kind of magnifying glass, to assess the damage in detail. Once we understand the harm that has been done, we can then look at the relationship through a kind of “time-telescope” and think about the kind of relationship we want to have together in the future. These two perspectives help us to understand what has been broken, and what we might need to do to repair the damage so that we can keep our precious, long-term relationships well-maintained. It may also help us to see which relationships need to have clearer boundaries, so that people are protected from future abuse.

The close-up view

By looking at the hurt through a kind of relational magnifying glass we can identify the type and extent of the damage and understand how to help mend the situation. Understanding the emotions of each person, and their relational needs, can give us some strong clues about what needs mending. Sadness needs to be heard and comforted. Losses and breakages need to be restored. Anger and frustration need to be heard, acknowledged and resolved where possible. Someone who is stressed and struggling may need practical help and support. Someone who feels ashamed and embarrassed by their behavior may need to know that they are still loved and valued. Each person might look at their emotional and relational needs and describe what they need that might help them right now, and also strengthen the relationship.

What about abuse?

If a detailed look at the hurtful situation identifies a very painful abuse or broken situation, the safest long-term perspective may be to set some very clear boundaries on the relationship so that this cannot happen again. Our children need to know that forgiveness does not mean that they have to remain in an unsafe relationship with someone who has hurt them badly, whether the hurt was emotional, physical, sexual or spiritual. Sometimes an abuser will demand instant forgiveness and reconciliation, but this is a form of spiritual abuse which can make the victim even more vulnerable. One helpful response might be, “You have hurt me very badly. I am in the process of forgiving you, but the effect of your painful and abusive actions will take time to heal. You have broken my heart and my trust, and they will take much longer to mend than a broken bone. I have carefully and wisely chosen to keep myself safe from further hurt by creating a safe boundary between us by _____. Please will you do your part by respecting this boundary.”

The long-distance view

The long-distance, “time-telescope” perspective helps us to understand how important it is to repair the relationship. For example, if a complete stranger does something very annoying or hurtful or rude, we can forgive them in our hearts and leave it there. We do not need to have an ongoing relationship with them, and we will not see them again. The long-distance view reminds us that there may not be much we can do to repair that kind of relationship. But maybe we can bless them in spite of their behavior, such as by smiling, saying something warm and forgiving, or doing something unexpectedly kind for them. After all, we don’t know what they are experiencing in their lives right now, and it is very possible that their unacceptable and offensive behavior comes from some kind of painful brokenness and aloneness in their life. Our act of kindness and might give them hope or a glimpse into God’s love for them.

Create some simple scenarios of hurts that might happen in a brief encounter with a stranger. Think of some different ways that you and your children could respond to the situation with love and kindness, even when people are angry, unreasonable and disrespectful. If this happens in real life make sure that you keep yourselves safe, but also look for ways that you might be a blessing to the person.

When we have looked at the relationship that has been hurt, and we have identified it as a relationship that is precious to us, and one we want to have for many years to come, then we need to make sure that we do a very good repair job. This involves learning more about what each other finds hurtful, so that those situations can be avoided. It’s also important to learn what heals the relationship well after a hurt, because everyone is different, and we all need different tools to repair our hearts and our relationships. This needs warm and loving conversations, where each person is able to talk about their fears, their hopes for the relationship, and the things that help to heal their feelings. This takes us to the fourth place.

Fourth place – Understanding how to repair a broken a relationship

It’s not always easy to find the words to talk about our hurts and needs, and to make a good apology. It can be useful to have a basic model which can be adapted to each person and situation. Here is a clear and simple way to express how you have been hurt by the other person’s behavior, without causing further hurt to the relationship:

“When this _____ (be specific) happened I felt _____ and _____ , because _____ .
Next time it would be really helpful if you could do _____ (be specific) instead.”

It can be useful to write this out and fill in the blanks. The message can be said aloud, read to the person, or written in a letter.

Here is a clear and simple way to express an apology, without being defensive.

“I am so sorry that I hurt you by _____ (be specific). I caused you to feel _____ and _____. That was very wrong of me. I was inconsiderate and unkind (reword if necessary). I am very sorry that what I did made you feel _____ and _____. I really want to learn from my mistakes. Next time I want to do _____ instead. When you are ready, I would like you to forgive me and help me to understand how I can put things right.”

Relational Repair kit

Most homes have a toolbox or sewing kit, filled with things that can be used to mend and repair clothes and other household items. Just as we need to repair our belongings from time to time, we also need to repair our relationships. Talk about some of the repairs that you have made around the home, and to your clothes. Show your children what you did and talk about what was challenging, what you learned, and why you are happy that you repaired the item and didn't just throw it away.

Cut cardstock into the shapes of different tools, such as a hammer, a tube of glue, a large reel of thread, a wrench, etc. Make the shapes chunky so you can write on them. Then talk about some of the different ways you can repair a relationship when someone has been hurt. Write each idea on a different tool. Talk about them and practice different ways to put them into action. Add extra ideas of your own that you have found helpful in your life.

- Talk things through calmly (Prov. 15:1)
- Listen well to the other person (James 1:19)
- Make a good apology, using the outline given in the previous section
- Do something kind for the other person (1 Cor. 13:4)
- Fix what was broken or replace what was lost
- Write a kind note or card, or give a small gift (Prov. 18:16)
- Ask the person you have hurt how you can help them (Gal. 6:2)
- If you have said something bad about a person to others, go to those people, apologize and tell them good things instead
- Promise to change your behavior and not hurt them in that way again (Eph. 4:2, Col. 3:12)
- Express how much you love/care for the other person

How to use the repair tool cards

- Shuffle the repair tools and place them face down on the table. Take it in turns to pick one up and describe a situation when you might use that repair tool.
- Or write some appropriate and familiar scenarios on separate blank cards. Turn these over and take it in turns to pick one scenario card and one repair card. Discuss whether the repair would be appropriate for the situation, how you might put that repair idea into practice in that context, and what else you could do in that situation that might be helpful.

- Make a poster of the repair ideas and add more when you think of them. These can remind your family to keep their relationships in good repair.

Family activities and prayers to help children understand and experience God's forgiveness

God's forgiveness can be a difficult concept to comprehend, particularly when people have a damaged sense of self-worth. I have met life-long Adventists in their eighties who still struggle to believe that God has forgiven them for a mistake they made when they were a teenager. Even though we can tell people that God has forgiven them, some people need to have visual and tangible illustrations to help them understand the completeness of God's forgiveness. Here are a few tried and tested object lessons that explore forgiveness.

Bubbles - One way to help children understand God's forgiveness is by using a tub of blowing bubbles. Invite your child to blow some bubbles into the air, then close their eyes to pray for forgiveness for a specific thing that they have done. When they open their eyes, the bubbles will have completely disappeared. The bubbles can never be found again or returned to the tub. It is as if they have never existed and they have now completely disappeared forever.

Disappearing ink pen - Another way to illustrate how completely God forgives us is to use a special fabric marking pen that disappears in water. These can be found in fabric and sewing stores. Cut a scrap of white fabric or white paper towel. Let your child write a word, make a mark, or sketch a picture on the fabric to represent what needs to be forgiven. Place a small bowl of water on the table. Ask your child to hold the fabric in their hand, and then drop it into the water. Make sure that the fabric is submerged whilst your child prays for forgiveness. When they open their eyes, the fabric or paper towel will be completely white again and the mark will have disappeared.

Drawing in salt - Another simple forgiveness prayer activity uses a deep baking pan, and some free-running table salt or fine, dry sand. Pour a layer of salt or sand into the pan until it is about 1" or 2cm deep. Tilt the pan from side to side to check that the salt or sand will flow around freely and quickly. Use a finger to write a word or draw a symbol in the salt or sand to illustrate the "sin" that needs to be forgiven. Then close the eyes to pray, whilst gently swirling the pan of salt. When the prayer is finished, the marks will have completely disappeared into the salt and they can never be found again.

Keep telling positive stories of forgiveness

As a family, talk about positive stories of forgiveness. Look at the stories of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3-11), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), and the parable of the unforgiving

servant (Matt. 18:21-35). Also explore Jesus' forgiveness of the people who killed him, the thief on the cross, and Peter, after he denied Jesus.

Tell your own stories of people who have forgiven you, and what that meant to you. Or how you learnt to forgive others, and the difference it has made to your life. If you can't think of a personal story, think about something you need to apologize for, or someone you need to forgive, and put your learning into action. You could even invite your children to pray for you as go through this process of reconciliation. Even though we might feel vulnerable, we will be setting our children a powerful example.

“The Forgiveness Project” (<https://www.theforgivenessproject.com>) is a charity that wants to help people understand the powerful significance of forgiveness. It has dozens of real-life stories of forgiveness in the world today that have taken place in extremely challenging circumstances. These are especially valuable for sharing with older children and teenagers. The website also has teaching resources, videos, a podcast series that explores different aspects of forgiveness, and a toolbox for exploring forgiveness in challenging contexts.

Forgiveness as a life skill

The skills needed to forgive others and apologize well are important life skills for every person, and especially for Christians. Keep studying God's loving and learning about His forgiving character, and talk about your experiences of His love and grace. Keep practicing, modelling and using the skills as a family so that they become second nature. These skills will help you and your children to become good peacemakers in their families and communities, people who will be called “children of God” (Matt. 5:9).

Karen Holford is the Family Ministries Director for the Trans-European Division. She is also a qualified family therapist and freelance writer. She holds a Master's degree in Educational and Developmental Psychology and a Master's degree in Leadership, both from Andrews University, and a Master's degree in Systemic Psychotherapy from the University of Bedfordshire.

ⁱ Coffey, J. K., Xia, M., & Fosco, G. M. (2020). When do adolescents feel loved? A daily within-person study of parent–adolescent relations. *Emotion*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000767>