

Learning to Forgive

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One student refuses to do her work. Another lashes out at a teacher who tries to help. A third student deliberately disrupts the classroom making it impossible for the teacher to perform her job. Still another comes to school with a gun, ready to exact revenge on someone who has mistreated him.

Anyone who works with young people knows many kids today are angry. There is an urgent need to understand why kids are angry and what can be done about it.

In research studies at the University of Wisconsin and in clinical practice in Philadelphia, we have demonstrated that children can be taught an empirically proven process for dealing with their anger safely and effectively. The process relies on training teachers to recognize anger in children and to teach them the virtue of forgiveness.

Yes, *forgiveness*. Our research and clinical studies demonstrate that forgiveness can diminish angry feelings, hostile behaviors, and aggressive, obsessive thoughts. Forgiveness can also enhance students' confidence while reducing the sadness and anxiety regularly associated with excessive anger. We've proven in studies with middle-school students in Wisconsin and in Korea, where our forgiveness programs helped improve the grades and reduce the detentions and suspensions of at-risk students.

Studying anger, learning forgiveness

Let's be clear about what we mean by forgiveness. Forgiveness is not being a doormat or acting in a weak manner, and it does not limit healthy assertiveness. It is not tolerating and enabling abusive people to express their anger. Nor does forgiveness mean trusting or reconciling with those who are abusive, insensitive, or unmotivated to change their unacceptable behavior.

Forgiveness is an emotional, intellectual, and moral response to unfair treatment by others. It is a process that takes time to develop. The first step is to understand and give up resentment toward the offender. In time, it might extend to offer understanding, compassion, benevolence, and even love.

To teach children this kind of forgiveness, educators must understand first why they are angry. In both research and clinical practice, we have learned that children most

frequently become angry as a result of hurts and traumas in relationships that seem unjust and unwarranted.

One common source of anger is the absence of a father or a mother in the home. Almost 40 percent of children and teenagers are growing up with at least one parent missing from their home, usually because of divorce. Even when parents are present, they often have difficulty communicating love and providing affirmation for their children. These parents can be angry, controlling, critical, perfectionist, demanding, selfish, or unavailable. Such missing or defective parental relationships might cause children to arrive at school feeling both sad and angry.

Other sources of anger include hurts and disappointments in relationships with siblings or peers. Some parents are unaware of or disregard these problems. Most children who are picked on regularly don't tell their parents, either because they are ashamed or because they believe their parents cannot protect them.

Some children lash out because they are copying the behavior of hostile parents or peers. Some feel cheated by their family's poverty. Others use anger as a way of feeling strong or as a defense against feeling sad, betrayed, or abandoned.

Dealing with children's anger

Understanding a child's anger does not mean tolerating angry. At times a student should be told, "Your angry behaviors are unacceptable" or "Please stop overreacting or misdirecting your anger toward us." After the child settles down, a well-trained teacher can step in with techniques that have proven effective in helping students deal with their anger.

When faced with a hostile student, a teacher should try to determine the origin of the anger. Students must be made to understand that excessive anger is not acceptable and will result in negative consequences such as demerits and detention. Some students can be motivated to work on their anger if they know that they are likely to be more successful in work and personal life if they learn to control their anger.

Educators can encourage students to think about trying to understand and forgive the targets of their anger. They can also suggest new ways of thinking: "Try to think, 'I want to let go of my anger so I can feel less upset and more peaceful. I want to try to forgive the person who has hurt me.'"

When working with younger students, a teacher can help a child deal with anger by quietly removing the child from the setting and saying, "I sense you are feeling angry today. Can you tell me what it is that is making you feel angry?" If the child has

difficulty identifying or expressing the feeling, the teacher might say, “Why don’t I tell you some things that make people angry and you tell me if one of them might be why you are angry today?”

Then the teacher might say, “Did someone hurt you today? Did someone make you feel sad, lonely, fearful, or insecure today?” or, “Are you angry because you can’t have things your way in relationships or in the classroom?”

Even if the children cannot identify the cause of their anger, they can be taught how to begin the process of letting go of resentment. Here's an example of how this method worked in a Philadelphia school:

A third-grade teacher noticed that Emily was agitated and not getting along with her classmates. The teacher asked Emily to please come over to a quiet area in the room. "Emily," she said, "I have been watching you this morning and you seem very irritable. Right now you won't look at me, and with your arms folded, it looks like I am bothering you, too. Is there anything I can do to help you feel better today?"

“I don’t know,” Emily said.

“Well, maybe someone has made you feel angry and you don’t know what to do with that anger," the teacher suggested. "Do you know who made you angry?" When Emily did not respond, the teacher added, “Sometimes when someone makes us angry, we take it out on people who don’t even know what’s wrong. Do you think your classmates might be thinking that?”

Emily looked up. “I guess.”

“Oh, I think your classmates are wondering what’s wrong with Emily today,” the teacher said.

“Yeah.”

“Can you tell me who made you angry?” the teacher asked.

After a moment, Emily described how her father had failed to take her for school supplies the day before. Her mother had said that was typical of him because “he doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

The teacher explained that parents and friends sometimes disappoint us very much and make us feel angry inside, even if they don’t mean to. She suggested that Emily think about her disappointment in not having her father meet her needs. She suggested Emily tell herself, “I want to forgive my father for disappointing me,” or, “I want to let go of the anger I feel toward my father because he doesn’t know how much he hurt me.”

This technique helped Emily in class and she began getting along with her classmates.

Handling anger in older students

Similar approaches can be used with older students. If there is any concern that junior high or high school students' anger will become excessive or violent, they should be removed from the classroom or asked to go to a designated location for a cooling-off period before attempting to address the resentment. Sometimes an angry student might need to do something physical to release the pent-up emotion -- perhaps walk, run around a track, or exercise in place.

Once the student is more relaxed, he or she might be asked to sit quietly and write about who or what has triggered such an angry response. A writing prompt might say, "Describe how this person or situation makes you feel inside. How do you want to handle your anger?" It's fine to have the student answer these questions orally, but the student should have the option of writing a response.

Sometimes anger can permeate an entire class. If that's the case, a teacher can begin class by saying, "There are many times throughout the day when people disappoint and hurt us in different ways -- for example, by failing to understand or meet our reasonable needs. Let's think of the person or persons who have disappointed us today and begin by acknowledging how we feel. Do we feel sad or lonely? Insecure or anxious? Rejected? Do we also feel angry?"

Then the teacher can say: "Tell yourself: 'I want to let go of my anger. I want to forgive this person for hurting me. The longer I stay angry, the less I can concentrate on my work and the more likely I am to overreact in anger toward others.'" After a period of silent reflection, the teacher can go on with the lesson.

Some schools have had success with peer intervention and anger-reduction groups that help students learn to deal with their angry feelings appropriately. Often, though, teachers must deal with angry students one-on-one. That's why it's important to help teachers develop the skills to deal with angry students.

A trained teacher can often help a student find a new way of looking at his or her anger. Here's how Philadelphia science teacher helped a boy named Mike, who often looked angry and refused to do his assignments:

One day the teacher moved slowly to Mike's desk and said, "Mike would you please start your work?" When Mike didn't respond, the teacher asked, "Do you need help?"

Mike erupted, saying, "Why don't you leave me alone?"

The teacher spoke calmly, firmly, and respectfully. "Mike," he said, "please don't misdirect the anger you are feeling at me."

"What?" Mike said.

The teacher repeated what he had said. Mike was silent for a few minutes, and the teacher waited patiently for a response.

Finally, Mike said, "It's not you. My mom screams at me all the time. Every morning she just screams until I get out of the house. She drives me crazy."

The teacher leaned forward and softly said, "Mike, say to yourself, 'I want to let go of the anger I feel toward my mother. The longer I stay angry with her, the more she controls me.' Think about it. You do this exercise, and when you know you are ready, please start your work."

Within five minutes, the teacher reported, Mike began working. He stayed focused throughout the class. Later, Mike came back to the teacher and asked for help in learning how to let go of his anger. Eventually, they talked about forgiveness.

What districts can do

Teachers need the support and understanding of school leaders in dealing with angry students. It is not reasonable to expect teachers to control a problem that many mental health professionals have trouble managing. Here's what school districts can do:

- **Provide teacher training in anger-reduction techniques.** Even experienced teachers are often not confident of their ability to deal effectively with children's anger. Training teachers in empirically proven anger-reduction techniques is a good investment. Trained teachers can offer students options for dealing with their anger other than lashing out at others. They can also determine whether the child's anger is excessive, misdirected, or inappropriate. (Anger is quite appropriate, for instance, when a child is being bullied.)

- **Focus on prevention.** Develop programs to protect children from being mistreated, to help victims learn how to control their impulses for revenge, to provide treatment protocols for hostile bullies, and to train peers to deal with both bullies and victims. Given the serious anger problems in some schools, school leaders should consider offering conferences for kids on the nature and resolution of anger, particularly in the middle school years when bullying is often at its worst. One goal of such conferences should be to help students understand -- and put peer pressure -- on bullies.

- **Consider offering courses on character development.** Character education programs can help students develop certain virtues -- such as forgiveness, patience, and compassion -- and learn effective ways to deal with anger. Another suggestion is to

distribute educational materials on anger resolution to older students and their parents. One such publication is *Forgiveness is a Choice* (American Psychological Association, 2001) which explains a self-help process that has been shown to be effective in reducing anger in scientific treatment programs of schoolchildren.

• **Don't forget parents.** Because home is the source of so much of children's anger, it is essential to include parents in any anger-reduction efforts. Consider discussing anger resolution at PTA meetings or theme nights for parents, and explain to parents the approaches teachers will take in school to help students with their anger. Refer parents of students with anger-management problems to appropriate mental health professionals and to books on the nature and treatment of excessive anger. The most important way parents can help their children learn to deal appropriately with this powerful emotion is to do so themselves. When they model forgiveness, most parents report a marked reduction in the level of resentment and acting out in their children.

In the home and at school, we've found that forgiveness works. Most children do not know how to deal satisfactorily with their angry feelings and aggressive thoughts. They usually know only two options: to deny their anger or to express it. Let's give them another choice and teach them to forgive.

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