

Inoculating Children Against Violence through Forgiveness Education
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Introduction

We do not want our children to lose hope in humanity due to the grip of violence so strong in our time. How can we prepare them for the world full of violence and injustice? How can we help them grow up as the people capable of loving others despite frequent injustices in life? Forgiveness education may be the key to the important mission of inoculating children against violence because forgiveness not only deals with the issue of unhealthy anger, but also helps individuals develop positive attitudes toward others. This poster will first show the potential of forgiveness in unlearning violence by exploring the topic both theoretically and scientifically. Then, scientific findings from the empirical studies that implemented forgiveness education in classrooms will be presented by highlighting materials taught and positive changes made. Lastly, this poster will end with relevant implications for the use of forgiveness education in the context of religious education.

Theoretical Foundations

Forgiveness is a moral virtue practiced in the context of one person unjustly hurt by another (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Forgiveness is a two-dimensional construct; those who are unjustly hurt by another forgive by willfully abandoning their resentment toward the offender and trying to develop compassion, generosity, and moral love toward the offender (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Forgiveness not only involves one's feelings but also thoughts and behaviors and is different from calming down, condoning, excusing, forgetting, justifying, pardoning, pseudo-forgiveness, and reconciliation (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991). Forgiveness as a moral virtue is unconditional as are other virtues such as kindness, gentleness, and justice, and also the moral virtue of forgiveness works side by side with other virtues including justice (Enright and the Human Development Study Group, 1991; Kim & Enright, in press).

Scientific Foundations

Over two decades of scientific studies on forgiveness have proven over and over again that forgiveness reduces one's anger, anxiety, and depression and increases self-esteem and hopefulness for the future (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The clinical use of forgiveness has been tested with a variety of adult populations such as incest survivors (Freedman & Enright, 1996) and postabortion men, for instance (Coyle & Enright, 1997).

Empirical Studies On Forgiveness Education

Forgiveness education with children in classroom settings is a comparably recent area in the research on forgiveness. Milwaukee is the largest city in the State of Wisconsin, stricken by poverty and crimes, and Belfast, Northern Ireland is known as a contentious area with perennial conflicts between Catholics and Protestants (Enright, Gassin, & Knutson, 2003; Gassin, Enright, & Knutson, 2005). The levels of anger amongst children in both cities were higher than children in Madison, WI as the control city (Enright, Knutson-Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007). In a randomized experimental-controlled group study design, the effects of forgiveness education as a classroom curriculum were tested with 1st, 3rd, and 5th grade children in Milwaukee, WI and 1st and 3rd grade children in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Enright, Knutson-Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007; Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Knutson Enright, & Enright, 2008).

Forgiveness curriculum guides created by Robert Enright and his forgiveness team were used as the teaching materials for children in forgiveness education groups. Different from the clinical use of forgiveness that helps individuals go through the process of forgiveness, children were taught different components of forgiveness (inherent worth, moral love, kindness, respect, and generosity) by their own teachers as a supplementary course that took about 30-60 minutes a week for 12 weeks. Children learned each lesson through listening to stories appropriate for their ages, followed by relevant discussions and/or activities.

Results showed that forgiveness education reduced anger in students and increased cooperation in classrooms (Enright, Knutson-Enright, Holter, Baskin, & Knutson, 2007; Holter, Magnuson, Knutson, Knutson Enright, & Enright, 2008).

Implications

Forgiveness is endorsed by all major religions (Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992). Violence is a serious issue even amongst the most religious, which indicates that the teaching of forgiveness have not been successful. Through forgiveness education, religious educators can teach children that forgiveness is the core of their development and is a practicable virtue, more than a mere ideal. Teachers, parents, and children will be given more opportunities to discuss about the importance of forgiveness on the community level. Children will learn to deal with injustice in life from the early ages on instead of resorting to violence. Religious communities can recover their identity as those at the forefront of leading loving and forgiving lives.

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