

How to Teach a Child Forgiveness

Children are often asked to forgive: forgive his sibling for taking their toy; forgive Johnny for pulling her hair at recess; forgive Mom for being late.

When you ask your child to forgive — to say “okay” when someone has said they are “sorry” — does your child really understand what that means? Did they let go of the issue or are they repeating what you are telling them to say?



It is important for children to understand compassion, loving-kindness, and forgiveness. Teaching your child to forgive is an essential life tool that will make navigating childhood and adolescence easier. Holding on to anger and resentment is a recipe for [anxiety](#) and [depression](#) for children and adults. The earlier forgiveness is taught, the earlier you can prevent children from taking on the victim role. That in turn helps prevent anxiety and depression.

So how do you teach forgiveness?

7 Ideas on Teaching Children Forgiveness

While there's no sure-fire way to teach your child forgiveness, some of these ideas may help get you started.

1. **Forgiving is not forgetting.**

Children — and many adults hesitate to forgive because they believe it means condoning the other person's behaviors. There is also a misperception that forgiving means forgetting, which might bring on fear it will happen again. In reality, to forgive is to say, “I did not like or appreciate your words or actions, but I am willing to let it go because it

does not help me to hold onto these feelings."

2. **In order to forgive sometimes we need to look beyond the action and explore the person.**

For example, if your child is upset Susie called him or her a name during recess, help your child explore what was happening. Maybe Susie was on the outskirts of the hop-scotch game and wanted to play. Maybe she felt bad she was not invited to play or was jealous of those who were. Helping your child understand a possible trigger for the person's actions encourages compassion and forgiveness.

3. Before asking your child to let go, forgive, or excuse a behavior, it is first important to **identify the feeling your child is experiencing.**

Is he or she angry, embarrassed, or disappointed? He or she needs to understand how the incident made him or her feel before he or she can forgive.

4. **State the feeling before offering forgiveness.**

Instead of asking your child to immediately accept their sibling's "I'm sorry," have them state how they feel. For example, "Jenny, I am angry you borrowed my shirt without asking. Please ask me before taking my things next time. I forgive you."

5. Once the feelings are understood, **visualization can help your child let go of any harbored feelings.**

Hand your child a pretend balloon. Ask him or her to think about the feelings he or she stated — anger, sadness, embarrassment. Then ask him or her to blow all of those feelings into the pretend balloon. Tell him or her that the balloon is tied to him or her by an imaginary string. When he or she is ready to let go of the feelings, hand over pretend scissors to cut the string and release the feelings. Help your child

imagine the balloon sailing high into the sky. When ready, imagine that the balloon gently pops, spreading a dusting of love and compassion to both parties. Remind your child it might take more than once and they can practice the visualization as much as they would like.

6. **Write a letter.**

This is a helpful exercise, particularly for teens. Practice writing a letter stating what caused the upset and how he or she feels about it. Then have your child write a compassion statement or one of forgiveness to the offender and to him- or herself. End the exercise by having him or her rip the letter up into the garbage, signifying the release of forgiveness.

7. **Be the example.**

Show your child how you forgive others.

It is important for children to understand that learning to let go may take time. The important lesson is to keep trying, making efforts, understanding forgiveness and loving kindness. Anger plus anger only equals more anger. Compassion and love are what heals.