

Forgiveness

As counsellors we sometimes find ourselves working with students who are struggling to let go of past hurts. These hurts, whether they arise from a misunderstanding, a rift in a friendship group or a more serious incident, can sometimes be quite crippling and can cause the students involved to become so focussed on the past that they are unable to enjoy current friendships, good times or a sense of fun, happiness and well being. Sometimes it would seem that nothing short of a catastrophic punishment for the offender will bring them any relief at all.

As parents we want our children to be happy. It is our job to teach them how to be so. Part of being happy is about being able to process or let go of those feelings and emotions that are preventing us from being happy. This does not mean, however, dismissing those emotions out of hand. Allow your child to talk about the experience that is making them angry or causing them hurt. Validate their feelings and empathise by letting them know that you understand how certain situations can be upsetting. Teach them words to describe their feelings, e.g. hurt, sad, disappointed, frustrated. This process can be very calming for your child. It can help them to understand their feelings better, and can also help them to feel understood and loved.

If we then help our child to reflect on how the other party might be feeling, we are teaching them empathy. There are always two sides to the story. Encourage your child to think about what the other side might be. Don't let them get stuck on not forgiving. Trying to understand why a person may have behaved in a certain way helps the process of forgiveness. Perhaps the offending party has behaved in a certain way because that is how other people have behaved towards them. Help them to understand that there are people in the world who have wrongs done to them every day.

Remember that feelings of anger, hurt and resentment keep them backwards looking. Encourage them to look forward. Ask, "What do you gain by holding a grudge?" When they are ready to forgive, help them with the skills to do this. Teach them that it must be honest and heartfelt if they really want to feel better. Don't pressure them to do this. Give them time to accept an apology or to make the decision to let things go.

Children who know how to really forgive are more likely to like themselves and to successfully manage life's experiences. Forgiving helps them to become kind, compassionate and loving with the ability to see things from another person's perspective. Children need to know that it's OK to feel hurt or angry but that holding on to these feelings can be harmful.

There are long lasting benefits of forgiveness including reduced stress, improved physical health and better relationships. Learning the process of clearing past hurts can free your child to live their happiest life.

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