

## The Forgiving Habit

By Shelley Petry, B.A.

As parents we are constantly faced with the difficult and opposing reality of wanting to shield our children from all harm and needing to allow them to be independent individuals. Although this reality is a healthy one, and definitely necessary in order for parents to maintain their sanity and for children to blossom as the unique and wonderful individuals they are, it hurts greatly when our children are somehow wounded by their outside encounters. If only there was a way to ensure that painful experiences were accepted, processed, learned from and left behind; a way to shield our children from internalizing painful experiences and in turn support them to gain a sense of personal power.

Well, according to Dr. Fredrick Luskin, Director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects, this is possible for all of us, through the power of forgiveness. His studies and subsequent books have made forgiving more than just an elusive ideal, and presented it as a practical step by step way to process wrong doings with the intention of leaving the hurt behind and moving towards personal power. So, great you say, how can this help my child?

We can arm our children by teaching them about how painful things impact our thoughts. By explaining that “when bad things happen that hurt my body or feelings, it triggers my brain to have thoughts about the event. These thoughts can then affect how I feel about the event, and if they make me feel bad, sad, mad, or inadequate, I have the power to changes these thoughts.” Teaching our children that they have power over their thoughts is like giving them the ultimate protection against experiences that wear against their self- esteem.

Once armed with this knowledge and foundation, you can actually support your children to process painful events, and begin work on creating a habit of forgiving through 5 simple steps:

1. **Label My Feeling:** Try to figure out what you are feeling (sad, hurt, disappointed, betrayed, lonely....) and what it was that made you feel that way (e.g., that Sally ran in to me).
2. **Tell Someone:** Talk to someone you trust about your feeling and what happened.
3. **Know it is Okay:** It is okay to feel how you do, and you have the right to be upset.
4. **Have Empathy:** Try to understand WHY the bad thing happened. For example: 1) Maybe Sally was just rushing and it was a mistake; 2) Maybe no one has spent time teaching Sally how to “watch out” for others; 3) Maybe Sally didn’t see me; 4) If Sally hurt me on purpose, she needs more practice on being a good friend, etc.
5. **Take Action:** Choose to feel better. Put an end to bad feelings by changing what you choose to think about! “I choose to CHANGE what I am thinking about and FORGIVE instead.”

This truly simplistic approach to working through daily encounters could be the difference between your child learning to internalize, ruminate over and feel insecure about things that have happened to them; or learning to acknowledge events and the associated feelings, and to put the hurt, stress and pain where it belongs, behind them, and on the shoulders of the perpetrator.

If you would like additional support or information on making **The Forgiving Habit** work for you and your family, our psychologists and cognitive coaching staff are here to assist you in finding the right strategies to bring this tool into your heart and home!

*Shelley is a Cognitive Coaching Specialist who has supported many of her clients in developing The Forgiving Habit. Through her compassion and knowledge, Shelley has a unique skill in supporting clients to work through upsetting events, find peace, and new skills. Shelley is an expert in working with children and teens with learning differences, cognitive disabilities, and autism spectrum disorders.*