

# Coaching forgiveness to the grudge-holding child

Volume 1 Issue 2 - 2014

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## A parent writes

Our nine year old is forever holding grudges against friends and family. How can we coach him to be more forgiving?

One of the many challenges that confront children is inevitably woven into peer and family relationships: forgiving those who have done wrong. Mistakes and disappointments committed by others find their way into every child's life, giving way to various emotions and behaviors. Some children firmly hold on to blaming indignation as if to punish the person who is at fault. This can go too far and ripple through other relationships, spreading negativity and leaving the offended child appearing petulant and unreasonable. If your child finds forgiveness hard to come by, consider these coaching tips to help change your grudge-holder into a forgiver:

### If your child is to listen with an open mind, start the discussion when your child is not holding a grudge

Rather than defend the wrongdoer, express concern for your child. Point out how often their mood is badly impacted by another person who frustrates them and the troubles that will follow them if they don't develop forgiveness for others. Validate their view that there are many disappointments in their life but the answer is not to hold on to the negative feelings towards others but to find a way to put them in place of understanding in their mind.

### Expand their view of making amends by describing how family members and peers repair tears in relationships

Grudge-holding children tend to view right and wrong through a narrow self-serving perspective, leaving little room for consideration of circumstances and intentions. Use examples to highlight what it means to give someone "the benefit of the doubt" or how to "give someone a break" when the effect of someone's behavior is not their intention, i.e., the effect does not equal the intent. Stress how allowing for a good experience with the person may not wipe away negative feelings but it provides a "relationship reset" so that the two people can move forward rather than get "stuck in blaming muck".

### Probe what other contributions may be underlying your child's need for finding fault with others

Sometimes this pattern is focused upon one person, such as a parent or sibling, while other family members appear to be granted much more forgiveness. Other times the child is insistent on finding

fault with a teacher, coach, or neighbor. The origin may relate back to some embarrassing or anger-arousing encounter that your child has not fully processed. If this pattern is in place it will be important to direct discussion back to the source and help your child realize how they are continuing an unhealthy pattern of retaliation.

### Challenge them to sometimes forgive without an apology while recognizing this doesn't require that they forget

Unforgiving children tend to keep a "running tab" of personal infractions caused by others. Instead of urging them to put it behind them, emphasize the individual growth they will experience by becoming a more forgiving person. If they fall back upon the claim that they will not forgive without an apology, discuss how problematic it will be if they will always require another person to admit blame. Stress how being an "apology extractor" only sets them up to be viewed as bossy and blaming. Encourage them to understand how many issues don't require formal apologies, and by waiting for one, relationships get even further torn.

## Acknowledgments

None.

## Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

## Funding

None.