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# Causes and Consequences of Children's Forgiveness

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**ABSTRACT**—*Although the topic of forgiveness has received much attention in research with adults, little is known about the precursors of forgiveness in children. This is unfortunate because research suggests that the capacity to forgive is associated with numerous beneficial outcomes, such as improved social relationships and psychological well-being. In this article, we examine the determinants and consequences associated with children's propensity to forgive. In the first part, we focus on four determinants: the role of children's characteristics, the relationship between victim and offender, the peer group, and family background. We propose that these determinants—together and on their own—predict children's forgiveness. In the second part, we provide an overview of the consequences of children's forgiveness, both at intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. We close with suggestions for research.*

**KEYWORDS**—*forgiveness; peer relationships; prosocial behavior; well-being*

Offenses and conflict are inevitable aspects of people's interpersonal lives. People may gossip behind each other's back, exclude one another, or divulge secrets that should not be shared. When people are offended and hurt, their initial impulsive response is often to retaliate and take revenge (1). However, giving in to these impulses can have negative consequences for individuals as well as relationships (2).

An alternative way of managing interpersonal offenses is to respond in a more forgiving manner. Forgiveness can be defined

as a prosocial change of motivation toward an offender (3, 4) despite the hurt that was done. The ability to forgive is an essential aspect of lasting interpersonal relationships (5). That is, responding in a forgiving manner generally relates positively to relationship satisfaction and stability. Furthermore, forgiveness has been associated with increased psychological well-being (6) and even improved physical health (7). For example, in one study, individuals who were more forgiving had lower blood pressure and heart rate than those who were less forgiving (8). Moreover, in interventions that promote forgiveness, individuals have increased their self-esteem, hope, and positive feelings toward offenders and reduced their depression and anxiety (9). Thus, the capacity to forgive can have beneficial outcomes.

Most of the research on forgiveness is based on studies of adults. Given the many potential benefits of forgiveness for both relationships and personal well-being, it is surprising that the topic has received little attention in developmental psychology. Consistent with its conceptual definition, when a child forgives it means that the child needs to regulate negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors he or she may have toward an offender, and transform them into more positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviors (3). Through forgiveness, children may be able to restore and re-establish those relationships that are so crucial for their social and emotional development (10). Also, children's psychological and physical well-being is likely associated with their ability to forgive offending others. Exploring the topic of forgiveness in children raises additional questions, such as how forgiveness develops across different developmental stages. In this article, we summarize recent findings on some of the determinants and consequences of forgiveness in children, and address these questions. In doing so, we hope to inspire research on this emerging but understudied topic.

## DETERMINANTS OF FORGIVENESS IN CHILDREN

Although little is known about when and how children forgive, in this section, we discuss findings on factors that may foster or hinder forgiveness in children and address outstanding questions. We structure the findings into four categories:

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characteristics of individual children, variables specific to the relationship between victim and offender, peer group, and family background. Each of these categories may influence children's tendency to forgive—some proximally, others more distally—and they may operate in parallel or with each other.

### Children's Characteristics

Children's propensity to forgive is associated with an array of children's characteristics, such as the Big Five disposition of agreeableness (11) or self-esteem (12). Regarding the latter, feelings of self-esteem may buffer against ego-threatening feelings and thoughts about the self often associated with interpersonal transgressions (13). Children with a strong buffer have less reason to engage in defensive retaliatory behaviors. In addition, individual differences in cognitive ability affect children's propensity to forgive (14). Specifically, greater executive control has been related to tendencies to forgive (15). In particular, the ability to inhibit prepotent responses facilitates the downregulation of the initial urge to retaliate for a hurtful act, which in turn allows a more forgiving response. In recent studies (14), children in late childhood who skillfully inhibited impulsive responses in cognitive control tasks (i.e., go/no go task, Flanker task) were also more capable of forgiving their friends. Such findings suggest that being able to inhibit impulsive responses generalizes to the ability to inhibit retaliatory impulses toward an offending peer and instead act forgivingly.

### Relationship-Specific Variables

Moving from the individual to the relationship level, a key factor in facilitating forgiveness is the perceived value of the relationship between the victim and the offender. In recent studies, children were more strongly motivated to forgive when the offender was close (i.e., a good friend) rather than distant (14). When hurt by a friend, children are less likely to make hostile attributions, feel angry, or be motivated by acts of avoidance or revenge than they are when hurt by someone they disliked (16). Together, these findings indicate that children's level of forgiveness depends on the value they ascribe to the relationship. Such findings are consistent with findings in social psychology (17) and often have been explained in terms of evolutionary principles: Acting in a forgiving manner is adaptive and hence may have evolved because it helps preserve and protect valuable relationships (18).

### Peer Group

Children spend much of their time with peers. Hence, in addition to the specific relationship between offended child and offender, when children are hurt by a peer, the event is embedded in the context of the peer group (often at school). In many studies, children's social standing within their peer group was strongly linked to their affective and behavioral responses (19). How does social standing in the peer group affect forgiveness processes? For example, are well-liked children or popular

children (i.e., influential children high in social standing) more or less forgiving? In our laboratory, boys who are socially preferred were more forgiving than boys who are less socially preferred (20). This may be because boys are better liked when they are forgiving. A related question is whether the *offending* child's social standing affects the level of forgiveness in offended peer. These questions merit study.

### Family Background

Characteristics of children, relationships, and the peer group may affect forgiving tendencies in a relatively proximal manner. In a more distal manner, family background may influence how children respond to offenses. For instance, children of parents who cope with marital conflict destructively (e.g., who fight or use verbal aggression) are more likely to behave negatively toward others (21). In contrast, parents who behave in positive interpersonal ways have children with more prosocial behavior and stable relationships at a later age (22). Similarly, parents' tendencies to forgive may be associated with their children's tendencies to forgive. In one study (11), parents who were generally more forgiving perceived more forgiving tendencies in their children 1 year later. Although parents' perceptions of their children may be biased, these findings suggest that parents' forgiving tendencies are associated with similar tendencies in their children.

This transfer of parents' forgiveness to their children may occur both directly and indirectly. For example, parents may advise their children explicitly how to respond when offended. More indirectly and consistent with principles of social-cognitive learning theory (23), parents are models for their children and children may imitate their conflict resolution styles with different levels of forgiving. Adults can promote prosocial responses in children: In one study (24), charitable or helpful acts by adults induced children to act in the same way. Moreover, according to social-cognitive learning theory, children are more likely to imitate models when consequences are immediate and clearly observable (25): Children who see their parents forgiving one another should be more prone to imitating that forgiveness because they can immediately see the vicarious positive consequences (positive affect, relationship satisfaction). Hence, children with parents who are more forgiving of each other also may be more forgiving of peers. To gain a more complete picture of when and why children forgive offending others, researchers should examine such distal origins of forgiveness.

### Determinants of Children's Forgiveness Interacting With Each Other

Although we discussed the effects of the determinants of children's forgiveness separately, these effects are not independent theoretically and empirically. Even though they may exert relatively independent influences on forgiveness, sometimes they may affect each other and sometimes factors from different broader categories of determinants may operate together.

Children's characteristics may operate in sequence with family background to determine how children forgive. For instance, parents may indirectly facilitate their children's tendencies to forgive by influencing the children's general ability to control their impulses. In one study (26), adaptive parenting behavior was associated with children's capacity for self-control. This may, in turn, promote children's abilities to forgive, as our own research suggests (14).

The different determinants may also interact to influence children's forgiveness. For example, whether children's ability for cognitive control is related to their tendencies to forgive seems to depend on the relational context, so cognitive control is positively associated with forgiveness among friends but not among nonfriends (14). In other words, children seem to exert control to respond forgivingly when motivated to do so, as when the offender is a friend. The broader categories of determinants (i.e., children's characteristics, the relationship between victim and offender, the peer group, and family background) provide a good starting point to generate questions on when and how different factors play a combined role in forgiveness in children.

### CONSEQUENCES OF FORGIVENESS IN CHILDREN

To consider the consequences of forgiveness for offended children, we need to first address the question of how children generally respond to a provocation. Often, when children are offended, their initial and impulsive response is to do harm in return (27). This may not only feel good—anticipating taking revenge activates reward areas in the brain (28)—but the tendency to retaliate after being offended may also be functional, allowing children to communicate their boundaries and possibly lower the risk of subsequent exploitation (18). At the same time, when children act on their retaliatory impulses consistently, serious risks may ensue.

As mentioned, the ability to act in a forgiving instead of retaliatory manner benefits interpersonal relationships and individual well-being, at least in adults (6). In this section, we discuss the potentially powerful interpersonal and intrapersonal consequences of forgiveness (vs. the lack thereof) for children.

#### Interpersonal Consequences

Numerous studies have documented negative associations between unforgiving motives, such as retaliation and reactive aggression, and well-being in relationships with peers (29). Specifically, children using retaliatory conflict strategies in response to offenses by peers have poor-quality friendships and are less accepted by their peers (30). Moreover, reactive aggression is associated with peer rejection and social withdrawal (29, 31).

By contrast, the capacity to respond forgivingly may in the long run promote general satisfaction and stability in friendships, or at least may buffer the well-being of peer relationships against the detrimental influence of conflict and interpersonal

hurt that inevitably occur in such relationships. In our research, children's self-reported level of forgiveness corresponded to prosocial behavior toward an offending peer (14). Specifically, when asking offended children to divide lottery tickets between themselves and an offending peer, children who said they had forgiven the offender gave him or her more tickets than children who did not report forgiveness. Such conciliatory gestures as a result of forgiveness may prevent a cycle of reciprocal conflict, which may help maintain the well-being and stability of friendships.

#### Intrapersonal Consequences

The capacity to respond in a forgiving manner may not only affect peer relationships positively, but may also benefit children's well-being more generally. In one study, forgiveness was associated positively with self-esteem and negatively with social anxiety (12). In another study (32), forgiveness was related positively to psychological well-being, but only when children forgave a friend, not when they forgave someone who was not a friend. Children who are unforgiving toward friends may experience psychological tension, resulting from a psychological conflict between wanting to maintain a friendship and wanting to retaliate, which can undermine psychological well-being. Such processes may be less relevant for forgiving or not forgiving someone who is not a friend. Thus, children's ability to act in a forgiving manner toward friends may affect their psychological well-being. However, even in close friendships, forgiveness may not always be the most optimal response to an offense. For example, when an offender repeatedly hurts a child without signaling amends or apologizing, forgiveness may undermine the child's self-respect (33).

In summary, studies suggest that forgiveness in children facilitates functioning in relationships and personal well-being. For children, the positive consequences of forgiveness may also affect peer groups and families.

### DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

In this section, we turn to questions for research based on the findings on forgiveness in children who we have reviewed. An initial question for study is how forgiveness progresses across developmental stages. Somewhat similar to Kohlberg's cognitive developmental stages of moral reasoning, different developmental stages may be associated with varying levels of forgiveness (34). For example, in early childhood, children do not seem to understand the concept of forgiveness (35), and younger children may be more likely than older children to retaliate after being hurt (36). In late childhood, children may realize that retaliation is not always the best option and find it easier to empathize with offending peers (37). In addition to the development of empathic thoughts and feelings, the development of self-regulatory capacity may contribute to children's capacity to forgive (38).

Specific developmental attainments or events may hinder children's ability to forgive. For example, as a result of the changes experienced in (early) adolescence, self-esteem tends to be unstable during this time (39), which in turn may harm forgiving tendencies (12). Also, the hormonal changes of puberty may affect children's ability to forgive. For example, when adolescent boys are provoked, their testosterone levels have been linked to aggressive responses (40), such findings suggest that specific changes (e.g., related to self-image, hormones) at different developmental stages may impede children's forgiveness.

In addition to fluctuations in children's general forgiving tendencies over time, fluctuations may occur in *whom* children forgive at different developmental stages. As noted, children's tendency to forgive is associated with beneficial outcomes *particularly* in relationships of high value (18). However, determining what type of relationship is valuable depends on children's developmental stage. In early childhood, children start to untie their parental bonds and focus increasingly on relationships with peers (41), whereas in late adolescence, the emphasis shifts from relationships with friends to those with romantic partners. Thus, the likelihood of forgiveness may vary as a function of how individuals perceive the value of each relationship and across different developmental stages (42).

In this article, we have focused on the determinants and consequences of children's general tendencies to forgive. Can forgiving responses in the context of one relationship (e.g., peer group) generalize to forgiving responses in the context of another relationship (e.g., family)? Relatedly, given that the aforementioned benefits of forgiveness occur most often in close relationships, when and why is forgiveness beneficial to children in less exclusive relationships (e.g., between bully and victim)? Researchers should determine when and why children's forgiving responses differ between relationship contexts and relationship types.

The findings we have reviewed provide insight into some of the general determinants affecting forgiveness in children. Less is known about more specific cognitive mechanisms that may affect children's forgiveness. In particular, cognitive processes, such as victims' hostile attributions of intent, may be associated with more aggressive responses (43). In one study (16), children were more likely to forgive an offending friend when they made less hostile attributions about the offender's behavior (16), suggesting that the same underlying cognitive processes may explain forgiveness. Researchers may also want to explore other cognitive mechanisms such as perspective taking, goal setting, or acting on values in work that examines the underlying cognitive processes of forgiveness in children.

Along with these theoretical considerations, research in this area requires advances in methods. Specifically, given that the research on forgiveness in children is exclusively correlational, experimental studies are needed to provide more insight into the causal processes leading to forgiveness. Also, because we lack longitudinal studies that follow the trajectory of forgiving

tendencies over time, researchers should combine longitudinal field studies with experimental laboratory studies to examine forgiveness in childhood.

## CONCLUSION

The initial evidence we have reviewed suggests that the capacity for forgiveness may be powerful in maintaining close friendships, and (perhaps as a result) promoting the overall well-being of children. More research is needed, which should lead to improved intervention programs at schools. Interventions to promote forgiveness in children can help improve children's well-being, and create more successful relationships and a more prosocial and optimal peer group. Research on forgiveness in childhood has just started to emerge, and we hope that this article will initiate further theoretical and empirical exploration of this important topic.

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