



Greater Good in Education  
SCIENCE-BASED PRACTICES FOR KINDER, HAPPIER SCHOOLS

## CREATING SPACE FOR FORGIVENESS BY LETTING GO OF ANGER

*"Holding on to anger, resentment and hurt only gives you tense muscles, a headache, and a sore jaw from clenching your teeth. Forgiveness gives you back the laughter and the lightness in your life."*

—Joan Lunden

### OVERVIEW

Students discuss the negative consequences that anger can have, identify the benefits of letting go of anger after expressing it, and brainstorm ideas for how to cope with anger.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students learn how to cope with their anger
- To help students recognize anger as a natural and normal emotion
- To set a foundation for forgiveness among students
- Any time of the school year

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 1 hour

#### LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

#### MATERIALS

- Book: The Forgiveness Garden by Lauren Thompson (a link to a virtual reading of the book is below)
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAVaDcCprAM>
- Paper
- Pencil/pen
- Construction paper

- Markers/crayons/colored pencils
- Backpacks (1 for each student or a few that students can pass around during the activity)
- Books or rocks to fill up the backpacks
- Paint and paint brushes (Optional)
- Large post-it paper (Optional)

## LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Identify different ways of expressing anger
- Identify the negative effects of holding onto anger
- Identify the benefits of letting go of anger after expressing it
- Create commitments for how they will respond to their own anger

## ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

## SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self Awareness
- Self Management
- Relationship Skills
- Responsible Decision-Making

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Take a moment to reflect on how anger makes you feel. What are some consequences of holding on to anger for too long? Have you ever done anything when angry that you regret or wish you could take back? What do you do to effectively calm down when you feel really angry? Consider making a commitment to yourself for how you would like to respond the next time you get angry.

### INSTRUCTIONS

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#### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

This practice can be used on its own, but is meant to be the first in a series of practices that teach students about forgiveness. An electronic version of the entire curriculum is available through the [International Forgiveness](#)

[Institute website](#). GGIE readers are able to purchase the electronic version at a discounted price of just \$15 (to order, click the "GGIE Version – Electronic" box). A printed version is available for \$40.

Before teaching this lesson, we encourage you to read this [short description](#) of what forgiveness is and what it is not.

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## LESSON

- Begin by asking students to raise their hand if they have ever experienced anger.
- Point out to students that anger is a natural and common emotion; we all get angry at some point.
- Let students know that this lesson will focus on anger in order to better understand the consequences of anger and how to cope with anger.
  
- **Reading:**
  - As a class read or listen to the book, *The Forgiveness Garden* by Lauren Thompson.
    - *Description of book:* A long time ago and far away--although it could be here, and it could be now--a boy threw a stone and injured a girl. For as long as anyone could remember, their families had been enemies, and their towns as well, so it was no surprise that something bad had happened. Hate had happened. Revenge had happened. And that inspired more hate and more calls for revenge. But this time, a young girl decided to try something different. Inspired by the original Garden of Forgiveness in Beirut, Lebanon, and the movement that has grown up around it, Lauren Thompson has created a timeless parable for all ages that shows readers a better way to resolve conflicts and emphasizes the importance of moving forward together.
  
- **Book Discussion:**
  - After reading this book, students can discuss the dangers of holding onto anger and seeking revenge, as illustrated in the story.
  - Discussion should include how the two different communities handled their anger and negative feelings and the specific impact upon individuals.
    - You can point out how revengeful thoughts and behaviors may feel good in the short-term but not over time.
  - Have students discuss in small groups how the main character in the book, Sama, calmed herself down after she was hurt, why she chose not to seek revenge, and the benefits in doing so.
    - You can bring up what Sama's reaction was when she saw her face reflected in the water and ask students to think about how they feel when they see themselves angry.
    - Students can discuss what would have been the consequences if the two communities remained angry at each other in contrast to Sama showing her community the path to forgiveness.
    - Students can also discuss how anger may make one do things that they might not normally do.
  - Encourage students to discuss or write down things they have done out of anger that they may not have normally done if not angry, and the consequences of those actions.
  - Specific questions to discuss during or after the reading of *The Forgiveness Garden* include:
    - What happens if you hold onto anger (immediately and in the long term)?
    - What happens if an entire community (like Sama's village) holds onto anger?

- Do you know of any individuals or communities that have held onto anger like the ones described in the book, *The Forgiveness Garden*?
- **Activity:**
  - To illustrate how tiring anger can be if held onto too long, have several backpacks filled with many books or rocks.
  - Ask students to hold one backpack on their back for five or more minutes.
  - Students can then share how it felt to hold the backpack, what was difficult about holding the backpack, and how it compares to holding onto anger for too long and the impacts on the body.
  - As an additional creative activity, students can paint the rocks with the ideas they generated about anger, i.e., “Anger zaps energy”, “Anger makes me feel bad”, etc.
- **Discussion/Activity on Anger and Coping:**
  - Ask students to discuss in pairs, small groups, or write down in their notebooks whether they have ever done anything when angry that they regret or wish they could take back.
  - Ask students to volunteer to share in the large group.
  - Individually or in pairs, have students brainstorm ideas for what to do when they feel really angry and out of control.
  - Have students share their lists out loud.
  - Alternatively, the class can brainstorm ideas together on effective ways to calm down when upset, angry, or stressed. Emphasize how talking to another person when angry or upset can be an effective way to work through these feelings.
  - The brainstormed list of ways to calm oneself down can also become an anchor chart in the classroom and displayed in the “calm” space of the classroom to help students remember how to de-escalate anger. It can also be a T-chart with “How My Body Feels When I Am Angry” on one side and “Ways to Calm Myself Down” on the other side.
  - Note: You may also wish to introduce meditation or controlled breathing during this lesson as ways to deal with feelings of anger that are hard to let go of (see [this](#) and [this](#) link)
- **Commitment/Closure:**
  - Conclude the lesson by having students make signs stating, “*Anger is a normal and natural emotion. It is what we do with our anger that is good or bad.*”
    - Students can state this sentence out loud several times after they have created their personal sign. It is important to emphasize this mantra and what it means.
  - If there is time, you can review healthy ways to express anger and the importance of talking through feelings with someone.
    - Students can write in their notebooks the following sentence and fill in the blank for themselves: When I am angry or upset, I will \_\_\_\_\_. Students who feel comfortable sharing with the whole group can do so.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Have you noticed a difference in how students respond to anger?
- What strategies for coping with anger were students most excited about and how could you support students in adopting such strategies?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [study](#) found that a forgiveness intervention increased adolescent students' hope and willingness to forgive, and decreased their anxiety and depression. The intervention consisted of approximately 23 hours of education, which were broken down into five main sections. The first of these sections focused on understanding the destructive nature of prolonged anger and identifying ways to express anger in healthy ways.

In a second [study](#), 4th grade students showed an increase in forgiveness and hope, and a decrease in anger after participating in a forgiveness education program.

### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The increase in school shootings, bullying, violence, and discrimination experienced by children and adolescents underlines the need for education that helps students cope with trauma and deep hurt, both of which can result in anger, anxiety, and depression.

Education on forgiveness is particularly important given that angry and hurt [children](#) who cannot understand their feelings often inflict anger upon others, or deny it until it erupts. Teaching children what forgiveness is and is not as well as how to forgive—including that forgiveness is a choice, does not mean condoning the behavior, and does not require them to remain friends with the person—can help create more positive and safe learning environments. Furthermore, [research](#) finds that when forgiveness occurs among friends, forgiveness is related to greater well-being for children.

## SOURCE

[The Courage to Forgive: Educating Elementary School Children About Forgiveness](#)

A Social Emotional Learning/Character Education Teaching Guide for Children Ages 9-12, [International Forgiveness Institute](#)

[Suzanne Freedman, Ph.D.](#), University of Northern Iowa

[Robert D. Enright, Ph.D.](#), University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education