



## LEARNING FROM COURAGEOUS FORGIVERS

*"If we don't do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can't work toward stable, consistent goals."*

—Ibram X. Kendi

### OVERVIEW

Students read *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, an example of a “forgiveness exemplar,” and reflect on the value of being a forgiving person.

### PLANNING FOR IT

#### WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To provide students with exemplars of children who forgive
- To encourage a forgiving character in students

#### TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 30 minutes

#### LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

#### MATERIALS

- Book: *The Story of Ruby Bridges* by Robert Coles (links to a virtual reading of the book are below)
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5iL7H-S99s>
  - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfXngHxD4Ak>
- Paper
- Pencil/pen

#### LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Recognize characteristics and actions of forgiving people.
- Identify the benefits of forgiveness.
- Reflect on their personal experience with forgiveness.
- Consider the kind of person they would like to be.

## 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
- Social Awareness

## HOW TO DO IT

### REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Take a moment to reflect on a character from a book or a person you know who displays a forgiving character. How were they able to forgive? What were the outcomes of their decision to forgive? Do you think you might be able to forgive in the same way? What makes it challenging and/or possible for you to forgive someone? Instructions

### BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- This practice can be used on its own, but is meant to be the fourth 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.

### LESSON

- **Reading:**
  - Read or listen to the book, *The Story of Ruby Bridges*.
  - Description of the book: "I pray for me, that I would be strong and not afraid. I pray for my enemies, that God would forgive them." In November 1960, in New Orleans, six-year-old Ruby Bridges was the first African-American student to attend William Frantz Elementary School. Met by an angry white and racist mob, Ruby courageously marched into the school, day after day. Despite the crowds, Ruby persisted and actually prayed for the crowd that screamed racist

insults at her. Famed Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles tells the powerful story of Ruby Bridges in this book.

- **Discussion:**
  - While reading *The Story of Ruby Bridges*, ask students to think about the connections between Ruby Bridges' actions and forgiveness.
  - Students can discuss who Ruby prayed for and why she prayed before and after going to her new school.
  - Ask students to discuss if they would have been able to do what Ruby Bridges did.
  - They may also discuss how Ruby did not have anger or hatred for the racist crowd that screamed insults at her and the sort of characteristics she displayed.
  - Students can discuss how Ruby benefited by praying for and showing compassion for the crowd of people that were mean to her.
  - Ask students to talk about how they personally feel after forgiving compared to when they remain angry.
  - Note: The reading of this book may bring up conversations about racism and why Ruby and other Black people have been and are treated unfairly in society. Students may also have questions about prayer and religion. Although Ruby illustrated her forgiveness by praying for the people who were being mean to her, it is not necessary to be religious to forgive and one does not have to pray for their offender when forgiving. This was just what Ruby did. It is also true that one may experience anger before being able to pray or forgive, even though we do not see Ruby getting angry. Ruby's courage in attending school and in forgiving the crowd of people screaming insults at her should be emphasized. If you would like to further discuss issues of racism and Ruby Bridges, the book, *This Is Your Time*, recently authored by Ruby Bridges, talks about Ruby's experience and her thoughts about racism, hatred, and bigotry. She inspires the reader with her stories of meeting other students and how she is fighting for racial equality and what students can do to help.
- **Activity:**
  - If time permits, show students this powerful five-minute interview with Robert Coles, the author of *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. This video illustrates and explains what Ruby Bridges had to endure every day on her way to and from school and what she did in response to the crowds that screamed hateful insults at her every day.

---

## CLOSURE

- Bring the discussion to an end by having students write their thoughts about the characteristics that are important to them and the people they want to be, and how that matches with a person who forgives or has a forgiving personality.
- Students can also work in small groups and discuss challenges to forgiving and what makes forgiveness difficult.
- Students can also discuss their thoughts about how forgiving and forgiveness are related to being courageous and brave.
- You may consider having students share their responses in pairs or as a class.

## REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- How did students respond to the story? Could they identify the benefits of forgiveness?

- What other stories might you read as a class to both provide students with exemplars of a forgiving character and help them identify the benefits of forgiveness?

## THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

### EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

In one [study](#), children between the ages of 4 and 6 were read one of three stories: a story about anthropomorphic animals sharing, a story about humans sharing, or a control story about seeds. Children who were read the human story were more generous afterward compared to the children in the other two groups, suggesting that children are more likely to internalize messages from books about how to behave when the books present characters that students can identify with.

### 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 can help create more positive and safe learning environments.

## 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