



FORGIVENESS IS IN OUR NATURE

“Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.”

-Mark Twain

OVERVIEW

Students use leaves as an analogy to explore how “holding tight” to hurt feelings can damage relationships and well-being, while learning that forgiveness involves gently “letting go” at their own pace.

LEVELS

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- Anytime during the year
- During nature walks or outdoor education
- Following conflicts in the classroom
- During life and career planning classes
- Before or after a class meeting focused on relationship skills

TIME REQUIRED

- < 30 min

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

MATERIALS

- Leaves (natural or made from paper)
- [Optional handout](#) (make your own copy from the link)

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will:
 - Explore what forgiveness is and how it can impact well-being
 - Discuss the nuances of forgiveness—and how it can take time
 - Reflect on and experience how forgiveness can feel in the body
 - Practice letting go of unwanted, unpleasant emotions

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)
- [Supports, Modifications and Accommodations for Students](#)

CHARACTER STRENGTHS

- Forgiveness

SEL COMPETENCIES

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

MINDFULNESS COMPONENTS

- Open Awareness
- Non-Judgment

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

Before diving into teaching students, it is important to check in with our own beliefs and relationship with forgiveness.

- What is your relationship with forgiveness? Do you find it easy or difficult to forgive people? Do you find it takes you more or less time than others to forgive small harms?
- What has supported you in forgiving larger harms? Have you experienced situations where you have forgiven but ended a relationship or created a new boundary? What made that possible?
- Have you noticed how you feel after you forgive? How does your body feel? Your mental well-being?
- Have you noticed your students struggling with authentic forgiveness (beyond rote apologies and verbal forgiveness)? Can you identify any barriers?

Note: Forgiveness can be heavy for some students, especially those who have experienced trauma or more significant harms. Consider reviewing [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#) to ensure discussions feel safe for everyone. You can also focus conversations around classroom harms and conflicts, rather than more complex and/or personal harms in children's lives.

INSTRUCTIONS

NATURE WALK & LEAF LESSON

- Take a nature walk with your class. To help ground students before this practice, you can incorporate some mindfulness practices like inviting students to notice how their feet feel walking in grass or through the forest, noting the smells, sounds, and sights of nature around them.
- If you are unable to take a nature walk with your students, you can collect some leaves in advance of this practice, or make (or invite students to make) leaves out of paper, and do this reflection right in your classroom!

Note: See [optional handout](#) you can print and share with students to follow along for this lesson.

HOLDING TOO TIGHT

- *[If going on a nature walk]* Invite students to look for a leaf on the ground (reminding them not to pick anything off trees or bushes). *[Note: This practice works even better in the fall with crunchy leaves!]* *If in the classroom*, invite them to hold one of the leaves they made.
- Say to students:
 - *Let's pretend this leaf is a hurt feeling someone gave us. Maybe a friend said something mean, or someone didn't share with us. Now, squeeze that leaf really, really tight in your fist. Hold it as tight as you can.* *[Children squeeze their leaves.]*
 - *How does your hand feel when you squeeze so hard?* *[Listen for: tight, uncomfortable, hurting.]*
 - *Now slowly open your hand. What happened to your beautiful leaf?* *[Children discover crumpled, torn, or broken leaves.]*
 - *When we hold onto hurt feelings this tightly, it can hurt us. Your hand was sore after holding on so tightly, right?*
 - *Can you think of how we might feel when we hold a grudge and don't forgive someone?* *[Listen for: tummy ache, sad, mad, worried.]*
 - *When we hold too tightly onto hurt feelings towards someone, something can break too. Can you think of what could break if we hold on too tightly to hurt or bad feelings about situations or people?* *[Wait for examples from students.]*
 - *Sometimes it's the memory that gets all crumpled up - if you hang on too tightly to the hurt, it could affect how clearly you remember the situation.*
 - *Sometimes it's our friendship that gets torn. When we hold tightly to hurt feelings or hold a grudge - especially if the other person apologizes and shows an effort to fix things - we might end a friendship with someone too early.*
 - *Sometimes it's our own heart that gets crushed. Holding on to our hurt feelings too tightly doesn't feel good for us. It uses energy to focus on bad feelings.*

LEARNING TO LET GO

- Invite your students to find a new leaf.
- Say to students:
 - *Now take your new leaf. This time, hold it gently in your open palm, like you're holding something precious.*
 - *This leaf is still the same hurt feeling, but watch what happens when we hold it softly. Blow gently on your leaf... let it dance in your hand... now if you want, let it float away. [Children can blow leaves into the air, place them in water to float, or simply set them down gently.]*
 - *See how the leaf stayed whole and beautiful when we held it gently? When we forgive, we don't squeeze our hurt feelings so tight that it hurts us and others. We hold them softly and then let them go.*
 - *Did you also notice that for some of your classmates, it took longer for the leaf to float away? Or they held it longer before putting it down?*
 - *Sometimes forgiveness can take time—especially if someone really hurt our feelings. And that's OK. We want to make sure the leaf lands somewhere safe when it floats away, so it doesn't get stepped on, right? Just like we want to make sure our feelings will be protected the next time we interact with our friend. So, when someone asks for our forgiveness, it is OK for us—and even good—to wait to make sure our friend, or whoever hurt us, intends to treat us better next time.*
 - *And sometimes the leaf floats away and we can't see it again. That means, sometimes we forgive but let the friendship or person go – if they really hurt us and didn't make things better after.*
 - *It is important to take our time with forgiveness. Sometimes it means taking a break from the person before forgiving, sometimes it might mean talking to an adult you trust. We want to make sure we forgive when we are really ready to forgive.*
 - *And forgiveness doesn't mean we forget about the leaf—or the hurt feeling. We want to make sure our leaf is safe in the future. So it is OK for us to tell others how we feel and how we want to be treated in the future.*

STUDENT REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

- Which felt better – squeezing tight or holding gently?
- What would happen if we tried to keep every leaf we ever touched?
- What will we remember from this lesson when someone hurts our feelings?

CLOSING RITUAL

- Have each child pick up one more leaf. Together, on the count of three, everyone releases at the same time – letting their leaves float on the breeze.
- Just like the leaf returns to nature, our hurt feelings can return to peace when we practice letting go.

OPTIONAL EXTENSIONS

- Real feelings: You can invite children to write real feelings or conflicts on their created paper leaves, to release, if they feel comfortable; being mindful not to name names of other children. This can be a private exercise.
- Leaf Pressing: Press some leaves gently in books to show how gentle treatment preserves beauty.
- Sand Art: Create temporary sand patterns that get swept away, practicing non-attachment to feelings or events.
- Daily Practice: Use the hand motions (clenching fist vs. open palm) as a quick forgiveness reminder throughout the day.

SOURCE

Jenna Whitehead, Ph.D., Simon Fraser University

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Which students seemed to connect most deeply with the leaf analogy? What made this activity accessible or challenging for different learners?
- Did any students struggle with the concept of “letting go” versus “holding tight”? How might you adapt the analogy for students who had difficulty?
- What surprised you about students’ responses during the discussion portions?
- Did you notice any students who may need additional support around forgiveness due to trauma or ongoing difficult situations?
- How did this practice relate to existing conflicts or relationship dynamics in your classroom?
- What evidence did you see (immediately or in following days) that students were applying these concepts to real situations?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND IT

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

[Research](#) indicates that explicitly teaching students about forgiveness not only benefits the one receiving forgiveness, but can support the well-being of the forgiver as well. In a [series of studies](#) with 177 first and third grade students in Belfast, children whose classrooms were randomly assigned to a forgiveness intervention decreased significantly in anger relative to the children in control classrooms. Students who participated in the forgiveness intervention also increased in forgiveness and decreased in depression compared to controls.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Teaching forgiveness gives students essential tools for navigating the inevitable conflicts and disappointments they’ll face throughout their lives. Ultimately, forgiveness strengthens children’s [relationships](#) and improves overall [well-being](#). Rather than leaving children to figure out forgiveness on their own—often resulting in superficial “sorry” exchanges that don’t address underlying hurt—intentional forgiveness education helps students develop more genuine forgiveness interactions.

But teaching forgiveness requires careful consideration of children's [cognitive and emotional development](#). As educators, we can scaffold this learning [developmentally](#): starting with concrete, hands-on activities in early elementary that help children understand what forgiveness feels like in their bodies, then gradually building toward more sophisticated discussions about moral reasoning and relationship repair as students mature. This progression can help to transform forgiveness from an empty social ritual into a meaningful life skill.

TERMS OF USE

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