



# Formative Parenting

*Cultivating Character in Children*

*A Ministry of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Immaculata, Pennsylvania*

## BULLY-PROOFING YOUR FAMILY

Bullies pick on others physically or through verbal threats, insults, name-calling, mean e-mails, cyberspace-disrespect, embarrassment, or by systematically ignoring another. Usually the bully suffers from poor self-esteem or has been mistreated and so retaliates against innocent victims out of anger, frustration, or in an attempt to command the respect that he/she does not receive naturally.

Personal power, self-control, and self-respect, are God-given needs planted in our souls. As early as the “terrible twos” children show the desire to be self-reliant. When that need is developed, children grow independent and cooperative and they are able to appreciate others and let others be different from them. If autonomy is not fostered, children either accept powerlessness and minimize themselves or they grow angry and frustrated, often trying to hurt others the way that they themselves feel hurt. Their anger gets directed at innocent others.

Bullies make targets of children who are smaller, weaker or shy, or others who receive recognition for their grades, looks, or achievement. In other words, a bully’s anger, negative self-esteem, and self-hatred does not discriminate. Victims may vary.

**Bullies** and **victims** are two of three kinds of people who are hurt by bullying behaviors. **Bystanders** are also hurt. They are people who aid the bully by:

- (1) omitting the good that they know to do,
- (2) committing the bad that the bully initiates,
- (3) standing by, looking away or overlooking,
- (4) actively encouraging the bully, or
- (5) ignoring injustice.

In contrast, **disciples** hear the voice of Jesus, understand his message of love and put love into action in the particular circumstances of the moment. Disciples are active witness who

- (1) stand up for peers,
- (2) speak out against injustice and cruel acts and
- (3) will not condone or tolerate cruel behavior.

## PROACTIVE PRACTICES

Parents foster a healthy sense of autonomy by doing nothing for a child that the child is capable of doing independently and by emphasizing the effort a child exerts rather than focusing on the result. In addition, the following practices activate self-reliance:

- Provide prudent supervision but not intrusion.
- Compliment specific performance rather than voice empty praise.
- Provide choices and invite age-appropriate input.
- Permit responsible independence.
- Encourage respectful assertiveness.
- Expect accountability for choices and consequences.
- Model self-control.
- Introduce Jesus and his Gospel of justice, redemption, and second-chances.
- Respect the dignity of every person.
- De-escalate tension by using patience and humor.
- Provide skill training in peaceful conflict resolution.
- Teach tools of forgiveness.

Bullying is a non-issue when we recognize that we are all members of one family. Engage children in discussion of the following poem:

*Mary is our mother.  
Jesus is our brother.  
Jesus is brother of you and me.  
Mary is mother of us - all three.  
Children of Mary, Siblings of God.  
Yet we don't love each other.  
Isn't that odd?*

## **TEN TIPS FOR VICTIMS OF BULLYING**

1. Be assertive, calm and confident—but not arrogant. Stand tall, make eye contact, address the bully by name, and express your position calmly and respectfully. (*“Philip, it is mean of you to make fun of me.”*) Use “I want” statements (*“I want you to stop teasing me.”*) Then walk away.
2. Do not fight back. Focus on how to avoid violence.
3. Do not trade insults. Ignore it, or agree with the teaser (*“I am packing more weight than I want”*), or make fun of the teasing (*“You should hear what my parents say to me about that!”*).
4. Avoid embarrassing the bully.
5. Pre-plan how to talk to the bully. (*“Why would you want to tell me something that might hurt my feelings?”*) Pre-plan to compliment the bully with honest affirmation. (*You are so quick with funny one-liners. I wish I had your skill!*)
6. Use humor (not sarcasm) to relax a tense situation.
7. Agree with the bully. (*“You’re right! Grades are important to me.”*) Or, if the bully makes an accusation, apologize for the misunderstanding (*“It was not my intention to hurt you. I apologize for the misunderstanding.”*)
8. Be proactive. Before trouble occurs practice ways to respond to a bully. Role play with a parent or trusted person.
9. Get help. Speak with parents and principal, teacher, or counselor. Talk about your feelings. Develop ways to release tension and stress.
10. Seek support resources like:
  - Pacer Center’s Kids Against Bullying, [www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org](http://www.pacerkidsagainstabullying.org)
  - Barbara Coloroso, *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander*. Kids Are Worth It, [www.kidsareworthit.com](http://www.kidsareworthit.com)
  - Michele Borba - [www.micheleborba.com/Pages/Articles.htm](http://www.micheleborba.com/Pages/Articles.htm)  
Concise articles include topics like: bully proofing, social competency, friendship, how to handle teasing, put downs, cliques, peer pressure, building moral intelligence, esteem-building, . . .

# TEACHING FORGIVENESS

One day Jesus said that if a brother “sins against you seven times a day, and seven times a day turns back to you saying, ‘I am sorry,’ forgive him” (Lk. 17:3-4). Jesus was speaking to adults but he may just as well have been speaking to children in a family.

Hurts come from varied sources. Easily children (and adults) feel left out, betrayed, cheated, overlooked, wrongly accused, discounted, violated regarding space or possessions, ignored, put-down, embarrassed, ridiculed, disrespected, used, or bullied. Because egos are fragile these slights fuel anger, defensiveness, standoffs, shutdowns, shutouts, and, perhaps, retaliation. These cause-effect dynamics occur at a single offense so what about multiple offenses? Forgiveness is more likely when the culprit expresses sorrow. But what about when the offender does not own up to responsibility? What about hurts that are never followed by the words, “I am sorry” or hurts that are repeated over and over again?

## **What is forgiveness?**

Forgiveness is proactive. It is a freedom that you give to yourself to “let go” of the offense rather than keep it alive by ruminating over it. The result is that you grow happy, healthy, and whole. You admit that someone has offended you, you name it for what it is, you do not condone the wrong, but you make a decision to grow beyond it and to release the negative emotions associated with the person or event.

## **What are the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness?**

When we hold onto a hurt, we let that event/person continue to hurt us over and over again. Un-forgiveness makes your own heart hard. Un-forgiveness spreads into general distrust of others. When you hold onto anger or hurt, you stop smiling and laughing. You cease to see the world around you with optimism. You isolate yourself. You go into a pity world of one. You cannot recognize and accept blessings that are right under your nose because you exist within an inner world of “I’ll show you” or “I’ll get even with you” or “I’ll punish you; I’ll make you pay!” or “You’ll be sorry!” By these kinds of thoughts/reactions, you actually continue to hurt your own self. Your soul shrivels up. You become bitter and life stops for you. Meanwhile, the offending person may be totally unaware of hurting you or worse, totally unconcerned for causing hurt. That person continues to be just fine while you are destroying yourself – emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Anger affects health.

Surely we have all heard the expression, “Forgive and forget” or the expression, “I can forgive but I will never forget!” The first expression requires thoughtful interpretation lest we mistakenly conclude that brainwashing is a component of forgiveness. The second expression fails to recognize that it is the essence of forgiveness to release the hurt from memories.

Forgiveness is a gift that you first give to yourself. Secondly it is a gift that you offer to the offending person who may or may not accept it. If the offender does accept your gift of forgiveness he/she can be converted and, possibly, be restored to your friendship. If the offender does not accept responsibility, he/she chooses to remain outside your circle of friendship but you release yourself from the paralyzing effects of un-forgiveness. You liberate yourself to grow when you “let go” of the offense.

## Ten Tips in Teaching Children How to Forgive

1. On days that you are in a good mood and rested you react differently to stimulus than you do on a day when you are irritable. Establish good **sleep routines and nutrition habits**.

2. We each have tender **pressure points** that make us more sensitive to feel hurt in situations that do not offend other people. For example, a tendency to feel ignored, exploited, unappreciated or superior. Grow to know yourself and use self-talk when tempted by feelings of hurt or anger.

3. Use **"I" Messages** to communicate in a respectfully assertive way.

- When... (State the behavior.)
- I feel . . . (State the feeling.)
- Because . . . (State the consequence.)
- Request (State your need.)

Example: "When dirty dishes are left on the table I feel taken for granted because I am left to clean up the mess that others make. Please show respect for me by clearing your meal space before leaving the table."

4. Use **"I" Statements** to express needs, feelings, wants, and desires. Example: I need you to turn the stereo volume down to "three" or "I feel invisible" or "I desire to complete my thought before hearing a response."

6. Whenever anger/hurt surfaces pray a **mantra** (aspiration) like: "My Jesus, mercy." "Mother of Good Counsel, counsel and protect me." "Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in you." "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing."

### Food for Thought

"In all things be self-possessed. To let another person determine whether you will be rude or gracious, elated or depressed is to relinquish ultimately, your only true possession – self-possession." Ben Harris

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Mahatma Gandhi

"Love is an act of endless forgiveness, a tender look which becomes a habit." Peter Ustinov

"Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future." Paul Boese

"Without forgiveness, there is no future." Desmond Tutu

7. Use a **PRAYER BOWL** to turn over to God a hurtful person/situation over which you have no control. Write the situation on paper, place it in the bowl, and ask God for the grace needed. Then "let go" of the situation.

8. **Reverse roles**. Put yourself in the shoes of the offender. What do you think is the reason behind the behavior (*attention, power/control, revenge, or inadequacy*)? Rather than take it personally, consider the behavior as the personal struggle or the offender.

9. **Ground yourself**. Carry a small wooden cross or a prayer stone in your pocket. When hurt or anger press on your heart, touch the object and recall that God is with you.

10. Every time you think of the offender, pray this **personalized version of the Our Father**.

\_\_\_\_\_'s Father, who are in heaven,  
holy be Your name in \_\_\_\_.  
Your kingdom come in \_\_\_\_.  
Your will be done in \_\_\_\_  
on earth as if s/he were with You in heaven.  
Give \_\_\_\_ her/his daily bread.  
All that s/he needs to sustain life.  
Forgive \_\_\_\_ and help \_\_\_\_ to forgive others.  
Do not put \_\_\_\_ to the test for s/he is weak like  
the rest of us.  
And please, deliver \_\_\_\_ from the evil one.  
Let \_\_\_\_'s joy be in Your kingdom and power  
and glory. Amen.