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Good evening! [introduce yourself]

I want to start our talk today by asking by a show of hands how many of you have ever been hurt by another person. It could be small hurts, or big ones. Every single one of us, right?

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I'd like for everyone to think of a small hurt —not something really serious, but something someone said or did to you that still bugs you. Think for a moment about what your response to it was. And how you feel about it now.

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I'm guessing that for many of us, even with something small, this is not a very pleasant exercise. Because maybe you're still angry at the person who hurt you. Maybe you hold a grudge. And that doesn't feel good. Maybe it's really painful.

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That's what we're going to talk about tonight: that feeling of a past hurt. More specifically, how to let it go. We're going to talk about the science of forgiveness. More than three decades of research¹ tells us that this skill, the ability to forgive, is one of the most important things we can teach our kids.

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Before we jump into talking about what forgiveness is, let's talk about what forgiveness *isn't*.²

Forgiveness is NOT

- saying what the offending person did is ok
- abandoning a quest for justice
- letting them do it again

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Here's what it is:

¹ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-science-of-forgiveness_b_613138

² https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight_keys_to_forgiveness

Forgiveness is choosing to let go of your anger and resentment toward someone who hurt you, so that YOU feel better and don't keep reliving the hurt.

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It's not for them. It's for you.

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It's important to teach this to our kids because research associates not-forgiving with higher rates of depression and anxiety.³ Anger is bad for your health: Multiple studies find a higher rate of compromised immune systems⁴ and heart problems in adults who hold grudges.⁵

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But kids and adults who can let go of angry feelings when they've been wronged experience greater psychological well-being.⁶

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Of course, if someone hurts your child, it's critical that you try to protect them and make sure the person who hurt them is disciplined. Justice matters.

But if your child feeling lingering anger and hurt from something that happened to them, that experience is still hurting them. Forgiveness can help ease that hurt. Going through the process might help them learn to recover more quickly from future hurts, too. And when really bad things happen, the ability to forgive can be life changing.

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This is Azim Khamisa. His son Tariq was a 22-year-old college student who delivered pizzas part-time when he was shot and killed by a 14 year old boy. His father was devastated and, for a time, suicidal.

Then he did something surprising. He reached out to his son's murderer to forgive him. He reached out to the boy's family to ask if they would join him in forming an organization⁷ to help stop youth violence and teach peace. Instead of anger,

³ <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/01/ce-corner>

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4212945/>

⁵ <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/forgiveness-your-health-depends-on-it>

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6667651/>

⁷ <https://tkf.org/>

resentment and violence, Azim Khamisa chose forgiveness.

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[CLICK TO PLAY VIDEO]⁸

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Robert Enright is a professor of educational psychology at the University of Wisconsin Madison.⁹ He pioneered the study of forgiveness in 1985. He has seen firsthand how forgiveness helps people get over hurts.

[CLICK AUDIO ICON TO PLAY]

How do you cure a human heart torn apart by injustice? There's really one way, I found. Learn how to forgive those who have crushed you, and they won't win again. You can then stand strong by getting rid of these of these effects, which include low self-esteem, confusion, anger, resentment, even psychological depression, anxiety, self-doubt, and hopelessness. We worked in many of the dark areas of the world with a lot of injustices and people have gotten their lives back when they forgive.

I want parents to know that resentment can do a serious number on their children. And it might take 30 or 40 years for the resentment to work it's rusting toxicity and really hurt their child. And I am desperate in getting this message out that that is a literal cure. Forgiveness is the cure for resentment that can kill. Give them the medicine.

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Being able to let go of anger and resentment has some not-so-obvious benefits. One study found that middle school kids who did forgiveness training were able to raise their grades from almost failing to above average the following year.¹⁰

[CLICK AUDIO ICON TO PLAY]

If you are a 13-year-old in middle school and you have a throbbing knee that day, you're going to miss the lesson because your knee is getting in the way of concentration. What if you have a broken heart and you have this lesson? You're going to miss it, too. But what if we can bind up the heart? Now, you have more time, focus,

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xY8Vd6cWIS8>

⁹ <https://edpsych.education.wisc.edu/staff/enright-robert/>

¹⁰ https://internationalforgiveness.com/files/GambaroForgivenessEducationMay_9_2008.pdf

and energy to focus on your lessons...

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So how can you teach your child how to forgive? Enright says one way is to model forgiveness in your everyday conversations with your kids.

That means not saying "That jerk cut me off, what an @\$%!"

And instead maybe saying, "Wow, I'm mad at being cut off. But that person may not have seen me or may have something upsetting on his mind. I hope he gets where he's going safely."

(Try this, you'll be surprised at how much better *you* feel.)

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Enright says the ability to forgive is like a muscle. It gets stronger with practice.¹¹ So it's easier to start out with light weights--or small hurts--so that you're ready for the bigger ones.

[CLICK AUDIO ICON TO PLAY]

Practicing forgiveness with the family with a 10-minute forgiveness talk once a week can help fortify people so that if then a huge injustice has happened 10, 20, 30, 40 years later, they are equipped. I use the term becoming forgivingly fit.

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Robert Enright developed a step by step process for introducing kids to forgiving others. Let's look at the steps, which you can talk your child through when you see him holding on to a hurt. You've all got this on a handout, too. He developed these steps as a suggested model for conversations with kids¹², and this was specifically designed for teaching siblings how to forgive when they have conflicts. How many of us have kids who fight? You can see that what the conversation is emphasizing--deciding to let go of feeling angry, on your own timeline.

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This is Ojig, a mom of two boys, who tried this because she was worried that their constant fighting was going to hurt their chances of being close as adults. Here she is

¹¹ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight_keys_to_forgiveness

¹² <https://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/infographic-teaching-kids-to-forgive/>

introducing the idea of forgiveness to her younger son Jono, who is 5. First she acknowledges the feelings. Then she helps him look at what happened and how it affected him.

[CLICK AUDIO ICON TO PLAY]

OJIG So, Johnno, what happened? How are you feeling right now? Angry.

What are you angry about?

OJIG But what happened?

They were laughing at my helmet, the one that I created so, so, so, so, so hard.

You worked really hard to make a helmet, and then when you wore it what did they say?

They were just laughing.

And did you have time to cool off or cool down?

Hmm-mm.

Are you ready to consider forgiving?

Not yet. I'm not even ready yet for forgiving Ariana. She was not making fair rules in the other game.

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She asked Jono if he was ready to forgive -- and remember, there's no right or wrong answer. It's OK for your kid to say no. But it's good just to introduce the idea. Here's Ojig again.

[CLICK AUDIO ICON TO PLAY]

OJIG So you know when you say that you forgive somebody, it doesn't mean that what they did is okay. It's that you're ready to not feel angry towards them anymore. So it's up to you, and I understand you're so hurt and maybe you need a little bit more time, but it's up to you.

OJIG Can you think of things, about whoever laughed, that you like about those kids?

I like [inaudible]. She does cool stuff and all those other things, like [inaudible].

And is she a nice person?

Mm-hmm.

And she's friendly?

Mm-hmm.

She's one of your good friends?

Mm-hmm.

Can you see the goodness in Ariana?

Yeah. I'm just upset.

Does your heart feel different now?

A little bit.

Does it feel softer?

Yeah, maybe a little bit. Little bit.

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These conversations introduce the idea that forgiveness is there for the person who's been hurt, that there's a way to stop feeling bad about it.

Sounds easy right? The hard thing is to practice is when it's easy so that when something really unjust happens your child has the emotional skills to deal with hurt.

So how do we do that?

1. Model it
2. Ask your child if they're ready to forgive when little hurts happen
3. Point out forgiveness when you see it -- like how it could have helped characters in movies, for instance.

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Remember we talked about the forgiveness muscle? According to Robert Enright, when we practice the process of forgiving with small hurts, we get better at it. And then when big hurts happen, we're in good shape, forgiveness-wise. You heard Enright call it being "forgivingly fit."¹³ Just like you wouldn't go from couch potato to trying to run a marathon, he recommends that with forgiveness, we start small.

So now we're going to pair up and take turns talking through a mini version of the process that you have in your handout, the steps to going from hurt or angry to forgiveness. Each person can share a hurt they've experienced, not a life changing one, because we have to work up to those, but a smallish one—maybe the one you thought of at the beginning of this talk. And then you're going to tell your partner 3 things:

- How you feel about it now
- if you would like to let go of feeling bad or mad about it, and if so,
- Something about the person who hurt you beyond what they did, ideally something good about them or a reason you want them in your life

¹³ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/eight_keys_to_forgiveness

If it's someone you *don't* want in your life, that third thing might simply be acknowledging that they're human just like you. But remember, there's no pressure! Maybe someone in your life sent you a text today that really ticked you off, and you're not ready to stop being mad about it, and that's okay! Let's see how these conversations go, and in 5 minutes we'll see if anyone wants to share what they talked about. [PRESENTER ASK PARTNERS TO SWITCH OFF IN 2 MINUTES AND THEN CALL TIME AT 4 OR 5 MINUTES WHEN IT SEEMS LIKE PEOPLE ARE DONE. ASK FOR VOLUNTEERS TO SHARE THEIR DISCUSSIONS]

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Thanks for coming! Please grab a handout on your way out.

This talk was created in conjunction with the podcast *Like a Sponge*, a production of the education nonprofit GreatSchools.org.

Season two is all about the science of raising caring courageous kids. Check it out at GreatSchools.org or on iTunes or Soundcloud.¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://soundcloud.com/greatschools>