

# The Washington Post

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### Embracing forgiveness education to reshape our world

**By Patrick Wells***producer*

Many people on the planet continue to exist within a tribe, sect, gang, race or mentality, unable to overcome hatred or prejudice against another group. This frequently manifests itself as violence. Learning how to forgive may be the best and fastest way to end systemic negativity against "other peoples."

The best opportunity we have is to treat forgiveness as a skill and teach it at an early age in our elementary schools. If we can convince our children of the power and importance of forgiveness, when they become adults they will certainly be able to make effective use of this vital skill.

This is not an unprecedented idea. Robert Enright, a professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison explains, "People can respond to injustice and tragedy in a forgiving way because they had built their forgiveness muscle."

Forgiveness is most frequently perceived from a sense of spirituality. It is the essential message of Jesus Christ and among his most inspired teachings. The thought that we as humans have the power to forgive our brothers, our sisters and our enemies alike is as profound today as it was 2000 years ago. But treating forgiveness the same way we would math or grammar is almost unknown in today's educational system.

For eight years, Enright has led an initiative in Belfast, Northern Ireland to teach forgiveness to first graders as part of their elementary curriculum. Enright's theories are based on the conviction that forgiveness can reduce anger, which reduces depression and anxiety and leads to stronger academic achievement and more peaceful social behavior, which are compounded by externalities such as poverty, prejudice and violence.

Teaching the art and power of forgiveness to children may be both the best and the fastest way to positively change our world. I believe the Belfast experiment should be expanded to first grade classes in every elementary school in the world. The results speak for themselves, as violent crime in Belfast has fallen dramatically in the past ten years.

Central to Enright's curriculum is putting forgiveness into practice. Children are encouraged to find situations from their own lives and apply forgiveness to each instance. In the making of **AT JESUS' SIDE**, we sought to create a film that would help break down the barriers of forgiveness and encourage children to identify times in their lives when they have the power to forgive. We also created a platform for parents, pastors and educators on our Web site for teaching one of Christ's most challenging principles, "Forgive thy enemies."

Do I expect this film to be shown in the classrooms of our public schools? No. But for me it's a matter of insuring that children are exposed to the lesson of forgiveness in a format that appeals to them as often as possible.

With more wars, fueled by prejudice and hate, on the horizon, the time to act is now. We **MUST** make a coordinated and concentrated effort to ingrain the principles of forgiveness into our young children. This should be our cumulative inheritance to them: a world filled with peace.

Forgiveness has the potential to transform our communities that have not known peace for decades and reshape our world.

Patrick Wells is producer of "**At Jesus' Side.**"

BY PATRICK WELLS | MARCH 26, 2010; 3:04 PM ET

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