

Nurturing a Child's Understanding of the Need for Forgiveness and Reconciliation

When children prepare for their First Reconciliation, it is important that they are able to understand why they need to be forgiven when they do wrong and why they are to be forgiving when someone else does wrong to them. Because they are still in the process of growing out of a totally "me-centered" motivation for behavior, children in the primary grades often see apologizing and making up for bad actions as mere formalities that are unrelated to sincere changes in attitude. Though this attitude typically changes to a more responsible outlook as the child matures, the preparation for First Reconciliation may be an opportunity to bring moral responsibility into clearer focus and relate it more closely to religious education.

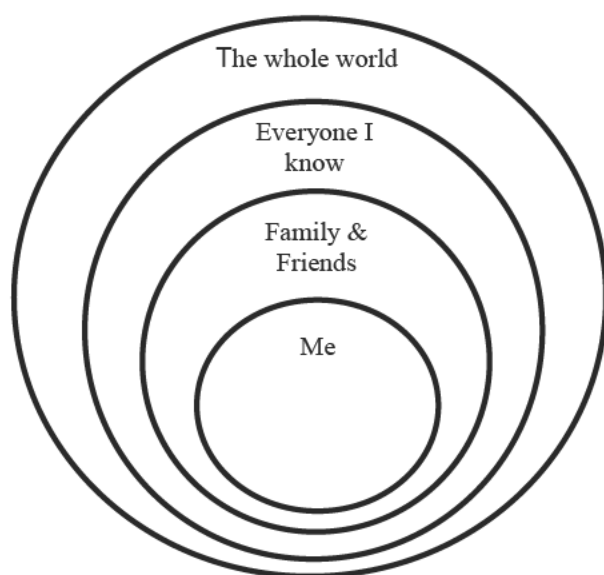
Growth in moral understanding for children in the primary grades depends on three factors: awareness of consequences, intentionality, and relationship with God and the Christian community. Although these concepts at first may seem difficult to communicate, several simple strategies can help in fostering children's moral understanding.

The most important strategy requires parents and teachers to spend time with children discussing their behavior. Many children grow up with a moral understanding that depends entirely on their parents' rules for making the proper choices. Children's concepts of right and wrong may still be tied to pleasing adults and avoiding punishment. Parents of children at this stage will find it helpful to invest time in explaining their reasons for the rules of conduct that they have set down for their children. Each time a child exhibits poor behavior can become a teachable moment that goes beyond simple, immediate correction to become an examination of right and wrong.

Consequences

To better understand the thinking behind rules of behavior, children need to widen their appreciation of the effect their actions have on others. Encourage feelings of empathy. Show children an image of ripples, or concentric circles, to illustrate this concept.





By helping the child see how his or her actions affect others and how people are connected, you can begin to show that there are consequences for others as well as ourselves when we make wrong choices. Family and social rules are intended to keep people safe and happy, so we should always be concerned, when making a choice, about who might be harmed in any way by what we plan to do. The first person to consider is the “me” in the middle of the chart. Children can be led to understand that every wrong choice hurts themselves, even before it hurts others. Then, while discussing poor behavior, you might ask: “Who was hurt when you [insert poor behavior]?” “How do you think he or she might have felt?” “How might you ask for forgiveness?”

Intentionality

Consequences are not, however, the only concern when discussing a moral choice. Often children find themselves breaking a rule or doing some damage or harm without consciously intending to do so. A key distinction should be made between the consequences or outcome of a particular action and whether the child intended or chose to cause the damage or hurt. Children are often corrected for both bad choices and unintentional mistakes, and they can come to believe that both are the same in terms of personal responsibility or guilt. Some children with impulsive tendencies may need encouragement and “helpful hints” to avoid unthinking behavior: stopping and counting to ten before acting; questioning oneself (“Is this a good idea? Is this a good way to do something? What will happen if I do this?”); asking an adult before doing something that might be considered risky. A key to children’s readiness for the Sacrament of Reconciliation lies in their ability to distinguish between mistakes and misdeeds. To help make this distinction, you might ask: “Did you do this on purpose? Did you think about what might happen?” when correcting a child, unless the answer is obvious. In that case, you can point out the difference. “The law of unintended consequences” may have an influence here, but talking things over can help a child consider consequences the next time.



For example, Johnny may not have intended to break a lamp, but he has been explicitly told not to throw his football in the family room. The correction needs to center on the disobedience at the core of the action. Even if a lamp had not been broken, Johnny did not obey his parents.

A number of tests can be used to determine this readiness. You might tell the child two stories. The first is about a child who gets angry with a sibling and deliberately pushes him or her down on the grass. The second is about a child who is playing ball and *accidentally* runs into another child so hard that the child is injured and has to go to the hospital. Then ask, "Which child made a deliberate bad choice?" If the child indicates that the seriousness of the act is determined mainly by the seriousness of the consequence or outcome, lead the child to understand that the person who *intended* to do harm has made the bad choice. An accident, even one with serious consequences, does not result from someone's deliberate, premeditated choice to cause harm.

This distinction becomes important, of course, when discussing the idea of sin as an intentional action, word, omission, or neglect that does harm to self or others. A person must be free to choose in order to be responsible for his or her actions.

God and the Christian Community

Consider that the reason we need forgiveness and reconciliation is that we cannot completely avoid sin in our everyday lives. Everyone falls short of the mark of perfection and virtue, and we all recognize that sin is a reality in our experience. When we sin, we deliberately act in ways that are contrary to God's intention in creating us in his image. In sinning we fail to live up to the dignity and grace that are part of our nature, and we also fail to treat others with the respect and love that they deserve as God's children.

The objective of the Sacrament of Reconciliation is to provide for us an opportunity to express our sorrow for sins we have committed, to ask for and celebrate God's wonderful forgiveness, and to be reconciled with God and the Christian community, the Church. Sorrow for sin means that we regret making the selfish choices that have caused harm to ourselves or others. Regret means that we wish we had not acted in a way that was against the call from God and the community to live as we are taught in the Gospel. It also means that we resolve to try hard not to commit those sins again.

A helpful Gospel story is the familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. In the story, the father, who represents God, is ready to forgive, almost from the moment his son leaves home. He doesn't stop his son's foolish choices, but he cannot stop loving him like a father. The son eventually realizes his mistakes, even though his regret is brought on by hardship. He returns to the father, sorrowful and humble, only to be surprised by the father's generous display of forgiveness. Lead the children to understand that God never stops loving us, and that our responsibility is to show our love in return by saying we are sorry when we sin.

As Christians and Catholics, we know that we are not alone on our journey with God. We are united with all the members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. It is through the Church and the Sacrament of Reconciliation that we have the opportunity to express our sorrow for sin and our desire to strengthen our relationship with God. When we are guilty of



sin, we not only damage our relationship with God but also harm our relationship with God's people, the Church. Furthermore, we diminish the power of the Church to do good. So we need to be reconciled, to become closer, to renew our friendship with our fellow Christians. In the Sacrament of Reconciliation we are able to do this.

You can use the image of family to illustrate this need for reconciliation with the Christian community. When families sit down together for dinner, it is always a happy occasion—unless someone has done something that needs to be corrected, or unless someone feels bad about something she or he has done. Until that issue is resolved, the dinner is not as happy as it should be. Families are sometimes in need of healing for very small or very big problems. The ability to work these things out together strengthens the whole family. In the same way, the Christian community, when it gathers, is strengthened by the willingness of its members to respond to God's forgiveness and seek reconciliation. For this reason, we celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation in community as well as in private. The Church is truly God's family on earth.

