

# An Environment of Forgiveness

*There is great power in forgiveness—it releases us from the guilt of sin and makes way for reconciled relationships. Therefore, our churches, schools, and homes should be marked by an environment where forgiveness is readily encouraged and demonstrated. This story shows the impact of having that environment in one second grade classroom.*

by Jennifer Boll

I started using the Young Peacemaker curriculum in my second-grade classroom on the first day of school. I had decided to be more intentional about conflict resolution this year, and begin right away teaching my seven- and eight-year-olds how to respond to conflict Biblically. In the first month of school, we worked through the meat of the curriculum: the slippery slope, the five A's of confession, and the four promises of forgiveness. We would go more in depth once we'd learned the basics of what Christ-like peacemaking was all about.

## Putting It Into Practice

One day, the mother of one of my students came into my room. She asked if she and her daughter, Amy, could meet with me the next day after school to discuss something. After school the next day, Amy came into the classroom followed by her mother. Amy immediately started crying.

Amy took a deep breath, and through her tears, she said, "Mrs. Boll, I've been stealing candy from your candy jar during recess when you're not here!" Then she broke down into sobs again. I was so amazed by what Amy had just told me, that at first I didn't say anything. Then I said, "Amy, I'm so glad you came to tell me this. It was very brave and very honest of you to come to me."

Her mom spoke up, "Last week, I found Amy with some candy that I know she didn't bring from home, so I asked her about it. She told me right then that she'd been taking it when she was staying in from recess and you were not in the room. So, while she was honest at that time when she was caught, I don't think she would've told you if I hadn't found her with the candy. She has consequences at home for this, but I'd like her to have consequences at school, too. She needs to learn a big lesson from this and know that it is not okay to steal."

After much discussion, Amy's mom and I decided Amy should apologize to the class, since the candy was used for whole-class and individual rewards. She didn't want to do it—but her mom and I agreed that it would be an important lesson to learn.

I gave Amy my forgiveness, and held her for a little while as she weighed the consequences of her sin. She was most bothered by this consequence because her best friend as well as the rest of the class would see that she was sinful. I explained to Amy that all people are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). This didn't make her feel much better, but she accepted her consequence and agreed to speak to the class.

## The Confession

The next day, as the class gathered for worship time, I reminded the students all they had learned about the Peacemaker principles of confession and forgiveness. I told them that today we would have a chance to see it in action—to see how it really works.

Amy stood up next to me, and made a passionate and heartfelt confession to the class. "I have to tell you guys," she said, beginning to cry, "about something I did that was wrong. I've been taking candy from the classroom, and it's not my candy, it's yours. I don't deserve it because it's for you guys but I was taking it anyway, and I was wrong and I'm really sorry. Will you forgive me?"

I choked back the tears as I saw how broken she was and how much she wanted forgiveness. I reminded the class what it means to say, "I forgive you." It means that we promise not to think about what happened, we promise not to think bad things about her or use this to make her feel bad, and we promise that we will continue to be friends. I told the class that as soon as they felt ready to give Amy these promises, they should come forward and say the words, "I forgive you," and then give her a handshake, a hug, or a high-five.

The students rushed forward from the carpet and crowded around to offer forgiveness to Amy. The Lord was visibly present among us that day as the students hugged her and said, "I forgive you." It was incredible to see true repentance in Amy's apology, and even more amazing to see how eager the other children were to offer forgiveness. God blessed our efforts and fostered a classroom where sin was dealt with directly, and where repentance and forgiveness could truly blossom.

## The Ripple Effect

But the story doesn't end here. The truly amazing thing was yet to come.

Several days earlier, one of my students, Darcy, lost her sticker chart—an incentive chart where students earn stickers during the day and receive a treat when the chart is full. Because the students were told at the beginning of the year that they were responsible for their own sticker charts, and they had to keep track of the chart to receive their reward, I chose not to replace this student’s chart until the next month.

The morning after Amy’s apology, Kara came up to me as soon as school began. Kara is a very kind, shy, responsible girl—the kind of student that you assume never does anything wrong. She got this funny, embarrassed smile on her face, and said, “Mrs. Boll, you know how Darcy’s sticker chart is missing? Well...” and suddenly, Kara erupted into tears. Through her tears she said to me, “I got really mad one day and I don’t know what happened, I don’t know why I did it, but I just felt like being mean and I saw it on the floor and I picked it up and threw it in the garbage!” And she immediately hid her face in her arms while her body heaved with sobs.

I was stunned. I mean, dumbstruck—I was speechless. I wasn’t mad, but I was so surprised—first that she would do this, and second that she told me about it. I asked her to come out into the hallway so we could talk without the whole class watching. I asked her to tell me again what happened, and she said the same thing. She didn’t know why, but she took that sticker chart and threw it in the trash. I asked how long ago this had happened, since Darcy’s sticker chart had been missing for two weeks. Kara shrugged, and I asked, “A long time?” Kara nodded and started to cry again.

I couldn’t imagine how Kara was feeling and for how long she had been hanging on to that sin. From her reaction, the guilt of her sin must have been weighing so heavily on her mind and I could visualize the Holy Spirit pressing on her heart to let it out.

When I asked her what we should do about it, she shrugged again and looked up at me with the face of someone who was broken, who was begging to be rescued, who was desperate for the comfort of the Gospel. I offered my forgiveness to Kara and reminded her that God says if we confess our sin, He who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). And that when God forgives us, our sins are washed away and they are stains on our life no longer.

I assured her of God’s forgiveness, yet also explained that forgiveness doesn’t remove our earthly consequences. We talked about how she could make amends for her sin, and she decided to take eight stickers from her own chart to fill up Darcy’s. I asked Darcy to join us in the hall, and Kara

apologized for what she had done. Darcy forgave Kara and hugged her.

## A Safe Environment

When I had time to reflect on this incident later in the day, I was struck hard with the realization that a student came to me to tell me that she had done something wrong, even knowing that she would probably get in trouble for what she had done. I don’t know how long the guilt of her sin had been eating her up inside, but I know she didn’t come to me right away. Kara didn’t come to me until after Amy’s confession to the class.

Suddenly, the enormity of what happened in our class gave me chills. Christ had been working in Kara’s heart to create an intense hunger for forgiveness—and after she saw what had happened with Amy, she knew that she could receive that forgiveness and have the guilt of her sin washed away.

The situation with Amy was a transformation for our class. Kara made it obvious to me that the Holy Spirit had created an environment that was safe enough for our children to admit when they’d done something wrong. Kara confessed to me what happened once she realized that the incredible forgiveness Amy had received could also be hers if she admitted her sin.

Ever since that moment, I’ve strongly desired to promote that safe and peaceful environment where students know that forgiveness is theirs. I’m trying to help my students learn that Christ’s atoning death on the cross is not just a lesson they learn, but a reality that is offered to them.

My prayer for our classroom is that of the Apostle John: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

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