



## Research Articles

# Exploring the Nature, Attributes and Consequences of Forgiveness in Children: A Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Researchers have unanimously suggested forgiveness to be closely linked with a host of positive life outcomes for people across all developmental periods. The scientific endeavours have largely been confined to the study of adults' forgiveness mostly employing quantitative methods and, thus, have overlooked the study of children's forgiveness despite its similar and noticeable relevance to their life outcomes. To bridge this gap, this study aims to explore the nature, attributes and perceived consequences of forgiveness for children. The study was carried out on full-time mothers of 4 male (5-10 years) and 4 female (4.50-9.50 years) children of the same local community. The mothers were interviewed about the nature of perceived wrongdoings, emotional, social and cognitive concomitants of forgiveness of their children. The contents of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim followed by their analysis by the Thematic Analysis Method. The findings showed that the children's transgression related to their immediate and tangible realities of life. The significant others played a facilitative role in their learning phase of forgiveness. The children easily accepted their wrongdoings. Some personality attributes regulated the understanding of their wrongdoings. Moreover, children's forgiveness was more explicit and, thus, easy to understand spontaneously. The understanding and acceptance of wrongdoings of the children were generally guided by their preferences, relationships, moods and concreteness. In essence, the children's forgiveness evinced close links with their social, emotional and interpersonal developments. The findings have been discussed considering the current empirical findings pertaining to the children's forgiveness and some cultural concerns. The implications and directions for future research have been discussed along with some limitations.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, children, life outcomes, performance, Thematic Analysis method

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The scientific study of forgiveness has a recent origin. It has been argued that forgiveness is a desirable human strength that entails a complex set of cognitive, affective and behavioural attributes (Lichtenfeld, Maier, Buechner, & Fernández-Capo, 2019; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). The researchers have suggested forgiveness to be a key component of renouncing resentment and may involve reconciliation (Thompson & Snyder, 2003). Moreover, forgiveness entails the interpersonal relationships that catalyse socially desirable motivational change in the individuals (McCullough et al., 1998). Forgiveness liberates the individuals from negative affiliations linked with a transgression, transgressor, or situations pertaining to a transgression. The consequences of wrongdoing carry negative thoughts, feelings, or behaviours leading to negative attachment and the conse-

quent forgiveness leads to positive and neutral reframing that eventually culminate in a weakening of the attachment (Thompson & Snyder, 2003; Thompson et al., 2005). Forgiveness carries a restorative ability that involves a set of processes that help to regain love and trustworthiness in relationships for both transgressors and transgressed and promotes finishing the chain of destructive outcomes (Hargrave & Sells, 1997). In this sense, forgiveness may be described as an awakening that is adaptive in nature rather than an act of will (Hill, 2001; McCullough, 2000; Thompson et al., 2005). Many positive life consequences have been associated with forgiveness. For example, positive mental health and well-being of the individuals have been found to be linked positively with forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Ripley & Worthington, 2002; Thompson & Snyder, 2003) while negatively with an array of psychopathological symptoms (Maltby, Macaskill, & Day, 2001; Worthington, Mazzeo, & Klewer, 2002). An absence of forgiveness leads to internalization of negative affect that, in turn, may lead to addictive behaviours and rumination (Worthington et al., 2002). Similarly, the negative mental health outcomes such as depression, anxiety, anger, social alienation, social introversion and psychotism have also been observed to be linked with lowered forgiveness of people (Maltby et al., 2001).

These findings regarding forgiveness of adults have also been shown in some studies focused on children that used quantitative methods (Flanagan, Vanden Hoek, Ranter, & Reich, 2012; van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2017). These research findings have shown some benefits of forgiveness for children (Berndt, 2002; Flanagan et al., 2012; Rose & Asher, 1999; van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2014). It has been argued that children possess many relevant abilities that are essential for their forgiveness (Eaton, Ward Struthers, & Santelli, 2006; Flanagan et al., 2012; Maio, Thomas, Fincham, & Carnelley, 2008; van der Wal et al., 2014). For example, it has been argued that children are able to regulate their negative feelings and thoughts that are closely linked to their forgiveness (van der Wal et al., 2017). It has been argued that family background may influence the way children respond to offences (Ackerman et al., 2013; Bandura, 2006). For example, the children of parents with marital conflict behave more negatively toward others (Fincham, Grych, & Osborne, 1994). Thus, interpersonal relationship skills and forgiveness of the parents, directly and indirectly, promote pro-social behaviour and stable relationships in their children with principles of social-cognitive learning theory (Ackerman et al., 2013; Bandura, 1986; Maio et al., 2008). The findings of a previous study suggest that significant others play an important role in promoting pro-social responses in children (Midlarsky & Bryan, 1967). Moreover, the parents may indirectly facilitate their children's tendencies to forgive by influencing the children's general ability to control their impulses (Finkenauer, Engels, & Baumeister, 2005).

## Present Study

Scrutiny of the previous research on forgiveness unfolds that many positive life outcomes have been found to be related with forgiveness of the adults (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000; Ripley & Worthington, 2002; Thompson & Snyder, 2003). Forgiveness has been reported to carry adaptive and existence values (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Oostenbroek and Vaish (2018) have suggested that forgiveness is important for cooperative relationships that are important for life success. It may be posited that similar beneficial outcomes for children may also be assumed as a result of forgiveness (Leever, 2006). Some studies of the positive outcomes of forgiveness for children have also been carried out (Berndt, 2002; Flanagan et al., 2012; Rose & Asher, 1999; van der Wal et al., 2014). But, most of them have employed quantitative methods that may be argued to lack exploration (Berndt, 2002; Flanagan et al., 2012; van der Wal et al., 2014). Moreover, the abstract nature of the construct of children's forgiveness made it a bit difficult, if not impossible, to study it with qualitative methods. One such study was conducted on schoolchildren (7-10 years) that aimed to underscore the development of forgiveness

as well as social, emotional and physical attributes of transgressions (Goss, 2002). Its findings revealed gender differences in children's forgiveness. For example, the male children exhibited more readiness to forgive as compared to their female counterparts (Goss, 2002).

Moreover, the nature of transgression and confession influenced willingness to forgive (Goss, 2002). For example, children accept apology more easily for accidental transgressions with low severity or unintentional emotional damage than the transgressions that involve damage of physical nature. The findings of the study showed that children developed the ability to understand the intention, the severity of transgressions and admission of guilt by transgressors while extending forgiveness even at the early age of seven (Goss, 2002). Similarly, gender differences were also observed in children's reconciliatory behaviours (Hu & Zhu, 2018; Ljungberg, Horowitz, Jansson, & Westlund, 2008). For example, female children easily settle with transgressors but uphold negative feelings and thoughts whereas male children do the reverse (Baumeister, Exline, & Sommer, 1998).

It is to be argued that due to the distinctions in the cognitive, emotional and moral attributes of children and adults, some significant differences in their forgiveness, understanding of transgressions and their consequences may be expected. It necessitates further exploration to understand the antecedents, correlates and consequences of forgiveness for children. It is surprising to know that the concept of forgiveness develops at a young age and younger children were able to comprehend the intentions and motives of transgressors and the role of apology like older children and adults (Darby & Schlenker, 1982). Thus, it is explicit that there is a progressive change in the development of the understanding of forgiveness. The adolescents have shown a developmental change in their understanding of forgiveness spanning from the most basic level, revengeful forgiveness to an external and more advanced level (Park & Enright, 1997). Similarly, it has been observed that young children show signs of guilt as a result of transgressions and make appropriate efforts to repair the damage (Smith, Chen, & Harris, 2010). Moreover, younger children of 7 to 12 years exhibit their familiarity with the significance of good relationships linked with forgiveness and apology of transgressions akin to adolescents and adults (Smith et al., 2010; Vaish, Carpenter, & Tomasello, 2011). The children of this age group also consider the intentions and severity of the act that affect their willingness to forgive (Smith et al., 2010). The younger children (6-10 years) understand the role of morality, justice and rights in their life (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001). These findings support the contention that younger children are capable of reasoning about a range of ethical and moral issues (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001).

Drawing on the beneficial outcomes for the adults, children can also be expected to be benefitted by greater positive emotional and health outcomes associated with forgiveness (Berry & Worthington, 2001; Orcutt, 2006). Thus, it is pertinent to explore whether children experience similar positive emotional and other life outcomes of forgiveness (Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2018). Despite these observations, there are limited studies on children's forgiveness, especially that have adopted qualitative methods (Akhtar, Dolan, & Barlow, 2017; Kueny & Cardenas, 2015; Oostenbroek & Vaish, 2018). The cognitive, social, emotional and moral developments of children have been studied extensively (Cillessen, Schwartz, & Mayeux, 2011; Eaton et al., 2006; Pronk, Karremans, Overbeek, Vermulst, & Wigboldus, 2010; van der Wal et al., 2014). It has been argued that affective and behavioural responses, cognitive ability, greater executive control, ability to inhibit impulsive responses and moral reasoning have a close association with the development of children's forgiveness (Cillessen et al., 2011; Eaton et al., 2006; Enright, Gassin, & Wu, 1992; Pronk et al., 2010; van der Wal et al., 2014). The meaning, nature and dynamics of children's transgression may be dissimilar as compared to their adult counterparts.

It may be speculated that the children may differ in the nature and mechanism of forgiveness, as well as in its consequences for various life outcomes. The researchers have suggested that it would be a valuable contribution to investigating the emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, social and personality correlates of children's forgiveness with appropriate methods (Vaish et al., 2011). In this line of argument, it has been further recommended that the qualitative methods are the most appropriate choice where the nature and attributes of the construct is not explicit or established, the significant correlates are not known, there is no guiding framework and there is a strong need to explore a phenomenon in depth (Creswell, Fetters, & Ivankova, 2004; Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Accordingly, the present study has employed a Thematic Analysis Method to study children's forgiveness as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This study aims to explore the nature and attributes of forgiveness of children aged 4.5 years to 10 years as observed and reported by their mothers. In this study, mothers were chosen as they are the primary and full-time caretaker of their children in Indian culture and carry enough information needed to explore the forgiveness of their children.

## Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

1. To explore the nature of transgression of the children,
2. To explore the modes adopted by children in the process of forgiveness,
3. To explore the impacts of forgiveness on their perceived life outcomes,
4. To develop an initial understanding into the concomitant cognitive, emotional, social and moral developmental attributes of forgiveness of the children.

## Method

### Participants

The study was carried out on mothers of 8 children aged 4.5 years to 10 years ( $M = 7.13$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ). Out of these, 4 were males with age ranging from 5 years to 10 years ( $M = 7.25$ ,  $SD = 2.22$ ) and 4 were females with age spanning from 4.50 years to 9.50 years ( $M = 7.00$ ,  $SD = 2.20$ ). Analysis of the data has been done comprising the sample in a joint family system where children sample were reared together. Therefore, forgiveness, in the context of the study, was not so abstract which could influence the perceptions of the participant mothers and make much significant differences in their children's forgiveness behaviours. The authors assume that forgiveness is here the outcome of shared child-rearing practice. The mothers who were full-time caretakers were the chief source of data. The mothers were asked about the nature of wrongdoing, emotional, social and cognitive concomitants of forgiveness in children. The contents of the interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and were analysed by the Thematic Analysis Method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The biographic details of the mothers and their children have been displayed in Table 1.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The selection of children and their mothers were based on some relevant criteria. Only those mothers were chosen whose children showed normal progressive trends in their important dimensions of development. The mothers who were primary and full-time caregivers and were also willing to narrate and explain detailed de-

Table 1

*Biographic Details of the Mothers and Their Children*

Subject's number	Children's gender	Children's age (in years)	Mother's age	Education	Socioeconomic status	Type of family	Number of children
1.	Male	10	36	Graduation	Middle-class	Joint	2
2.	Male	6	27	12 <sup>th</sup>	Middle-class	Nuclear	2
3.	Female	4.5	30	10 <sup>th</sup>	Middle-class	Nuclear	1
4.	Male	8	32	BA	Middle-class	Nuclear	2
5.	Female	6	33	10 <sup>th</sup>	Lower middle-class	Nuclear	2
6.	Male	5	34	BA	Middle-class	Joint	2
7.	Female	8	34	BA and BEd	Middle-class	Joint	2
8.	Female	9.5	35	BA	Middle-class	Joint	1

*Note.* BA = Bachelor of Arts; BEd = Bachelor of Education.

scriptions of the behaviours of their children were included in the study. Those participants who did not fulfil the inclusion criteria were not allowed to take part in the study. The data was collected from a single locality comprising 30 homes where mothers were primary and fulltime caregivers. Children in the locality shared common small playground irrespective of their age, no doubt in different herds. In this way, they were influenced by each other and a sense of forgiveness was instilled through older to younger children. Sometimes, play consisted of children of different age groups where age-relevant roles were prescribed. The unique feature of such plays allowed the participation of children of different age groups to play together. This socialization experiences had a significant bearing on the development of coexistence and forgiveness. The very nature of children's play required different roles to be acted by children of dissimilar age groups.

**Materials**

A semi-structured interview that comprised a pre-developed protocol was used to collect data of the study. The researcher (the first author) was free to add some pertinent queries in the interview protocol based on her insights and understanding expected to evolve during the data collection, regular consultations with new findings and discussions with the other researchers. The verbatim contents of the interviews of the participants were audio recorded with the help of recording device available in the mobile phone.

**Phases of Study**

The study was conducted in two phases namely, the first phase and the second phase. A pilot study was conducted in the first phase followed by the second phase that involved the actual study.

**The Pilot Study**

Initially, a pilot study was carried out to become familiar with the appropriateness of the interview protocol, the nature of responses of the participants and other procedural details. In the beginning, 5 questions were prepared and discussed among the researchers to explicate the efficacy of the language and choosing of the appropriate wording. Then, two mothers aged 36 and 37 years with a graduate level of education having a male child aged 7 and a female child aged 7.5 years were recruited for this purpose and their written consent was collected. A working research proposal was submitted to the Ethical Committee of the Department of Psychology and after the approval of the proposal, the actual data collection was started. The pilot study helped the re-

searchers to become familiar with the styles of questioning and building rapport with the participants. Five questions were prepared and put before the participants individually and their responses were recorded and transcribed. The findings of the pilot study resulted in an enhanced understanding of the essential knowledge and skills required for the actual data collection. The insights of the pilot study led to come up with the following interview protocol for the study:

1. Can you tell me the mistakes committed by your child in his/her day-to-day life?
2. Can you discuss the happenings/incidents that annoy your child?
3. How does your child cope up with the wrongdoings of others?
4. Can you describe the wrong behaviours of your child that he/she commits in his/her day-to-day life?
5. How does your child react/respond to his/her own wrongdoings?

### **The Actual Study**

The pilot study facilitated to come with a researchable proposal. The actual data collection was started after obtaining ethical approval from the Department of Psychology, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Doctor Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, India. The participants who fulfilled the criteria of inclusion were debriefed about the basic objectives and requested to take part in the study. Before the start of data collection, the written consent was requested to the participants. The interview was carried out by the first author in the form of normal conversation with one participant at a time. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants were ensured by allotting codes to the contents of the interview. The interview began with general questions like, "How you are and how the things in your life are going on?" Many pertinent queries were also satisfied during the interview. Following this procedure, the interviews of all the participants were conducted and the contents were audiotaped. The same was also transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The transcribed contents of the interview were presented to three experts with the request to enlist the significant descriptions and meaningful attributes. The experts were faculty members of the Department of Psychology and well-versed in qualitative research. Then, the researchers identified themes and sub-themes based on the descriptions and attributes identified by the three experts applying the Thematic Analysis Method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis comprises identifying, analysing and reporting repeated patterns (themes) of meaning within the data. It comprises six steps namely, familiarizing with data, generating preliminary codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report sample (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Results**

The thematic analysis led to emerging a multitude of significant themes about the nature and attributes of children's forgiveness. The analyses of data revealed many insightful and novel attributes of children's forgiveness. The following major themes emerged after analyses of the data.

## Theme 1: The Children's Transgressions Were Related to the Immediate and Tangible Realities of Life

The nature of children's transgression was related to mundane and concrete aspects of their life. For example, beating by parents, denying attending school (he attends school, but when asked, says he does not attend it (a lie), or he refuses to attend school), lying, beating others, poor school performance and pretending after their wrongdoing (lying, complaints from school and play, quarrelling with playmates etc.) reflected the nature of their wrongdoings. Moreover, cheating in play, and taking and eating things without informing others were also observed as the transgressions of the younger children.

The mother of a 10-year-old male child verbalized as,

"He accepts his mistakes after we punish him for them. He initially denies attending his school after father asks him. As soon as he realizes his fault, he silently goes to school. After committing wrongs by himself, he speaks a lie initially. After repeated interrogation, he speaks the truth and does not repeat it in future. He becomes rigid if has not made any mistake. Sometimes, he beats other children. He understands that poor marks in school are wrong and sometimes he hides it and pretends."

Watching TV and wasting time on mobile were the transgressions exemplifying the behaviours of a 6 years old male child. The mother of the child reported as,

"He sometimes becomes stubborn. He becomes rigid for watching TV. He also becomes angry, if things are not happening in accordance with his convenience. He likes mobile very much."<sup>i</sup>

Likewise, the examples of the transgression of a female child of 4.5 years old were beating other children and restricting the use of mobiles/TV. Her mother verbalized as,

"Sometimes she beats other children and reports me about such happenings. If someone other beats her, she does not report, and I could know only through others. She shows her unrest and anger if she is asked for stopping playing with mobile."

Moreover, non-adherence to others' instructions, not studying properly, non-sharing of things and quarrelling with siblings are major transgressions observed for a female child of 6 years old. The mother of this female child expressed as,

"She does not follow the instructions. Initially, she was good in studies, but she lost her interest in studies after her younger brother was born. She does not share even small things with her younger brother and blames that he (younger brother) claims ownership for everything."

The exclusion from a play by her playmates for unwanted behaviours, like frequent quarrelling and dominating attitudes, was the major perceived transgression for an 8 years old female child. Besides, restrictions on watching TV and non-completion of home assignments were the major issues associated with this girl child. The mother of this female child said as,

"She frequently argues. She does not attend and follow anything while watching TV. She has high academic aspirations; shows anger if asked about her school homework and denied watching TV."

## **Theme 2: Significant Others Played an Important Role in Facilitating Children's Forgiveness**

Parents, teachers, elder brothers and sisters played a positive role in facilitating children's forgiveness. For example, few male and female children forgave their transgressors after a positive intervention/interference of their parents. The parents, especially mothers' role was observed to be effective in their children's forgiveness. Here intervention means a positive resolution by reminding affection and kin relationship. In the culture, prevalent here in the society children are taught to treat other children living in the neighbourhood as like their brothers and sisters. These interventions were reported to be effective as they exerted a positive influence on the children's forgiveness behaviours.

The mother of a 10 years old male child expressed as,

"He accepts his wrongdoings and forgives others for their transgressions after we (parents) make him understand."

Likewise, a mother of an 8 years old female child said as,

"She becomes irritated after repeated forbidding. She accepts her mistakes and forgives others for their mistakes after making her understand."

## **Theme 3: The Children Easily Accepted Their Wrongdoing**

It was explicit in most of the expressions that children easily accepted their wrongdoings. Sometimes, they pretended to accept their wrongdoing. The mother of a 10-year-old male child verbalized as,

"He accepts his wrongdoings easily. Sometimes, he pretends for his poor performance in school or other wrongdoing."

The mother of a 6-year-old male child verbalized as,

"He does accept his mistakes easily and twists the story when get caught. He admits his involvement after repeated interrogation in an affectionate manner. He also tells about other mistakes immediately."

It has been observed that the children pretended after committing mistakes in a very identifiable manner. The mother of a 5 years old male child verbalized as,

"He speaks sorry for his mistakes. He easily accepts his mistakes. For example, if his legs are touched with others during his walks, he speaks sorry instantly. He mixes up with other children very easily. He does not accept his mistakes if he has not committed them. Sometimes, he becomes silent or starts talking something else, after committing mistakes. In this way, we become aware that he has done something wrong."

The acceptance of wrongdoing was the most common, which was observed in reported behaviours of the most of the male and female children. The mother of an 8 years old male child said as,

"He accepts his mistakes easily after an affectionate understanding. He tells truth and accepts his mistakes after interrogating lovingly."

A mother of a 4.5 years old female child expressed as,



“Initially, she does not do anything and starts crying if someone irritates her. She informs me about this. She accepts her mistakes by herself. Occasionally, I also become aware of her mistakes. Sometimes she beats other children and reports me about such happenings. If she is caught red-handed committing mistakes, she accepts her involvement or sometimes labels other children responsible for the occurrence.”

The children adopted a variety of modes for accepting their wrongdoings. For example, they primarily used indirect methods to accept their wrongdoings. Some of them became silent after committing the mistakes. The mother of a 6 years old male child verbalized as,

“He does accept his wrongs easily and twists the story when get caught. He admits his involvement after repeated interrogation in an affectionate manner. He also tells about other mistakes immediately. He does not retaliate.”

The female children also showed similar trends in the acceptance of their wrongdoings. For example, accepting their wrongdoing of beating others, pretending in their studies, postponing their studies in the absence of the parents and lying after their mistakes were commonly observed facts regarding their wrongdoings. The mother of a 4.50 years old female child verbalized as,

“She accepts her mistakes by herself. Occasionally, I also become aware of her mistakes. If someone other beats her, she does not tell by herself and I could know only through others.”

The mother of a 6-years-old female child verbalized as,

“She pretends to study when we are present around her. If we move here and there, she puts her books away. She hastily starts studying as soon as she becomes aware of our presence. If she commits mistakes by herself, she feels that she will be punished and starts crying.”

#### **Theme 4: Some Temperamental Personality Attributes Regulated the Comprehension of the Children’s Wrongdoings**

Some general personality attributes were closely linked with the children’s wrongdoings. For example, stubborn and non-retaliating attitudes were very common. The mother of a 6 years old male child verbalized as,

“He accepts his mistakes easily and twists the story when get caught. He also tells about others’ mistakes immediately. He does not retaliate. He sometimes becomes stubborn. He becomes rigid for watching TV. He also becomes angry, if things are not happening in accordance with his convenience.”

Some children also exhibited shyness, non-sociality and frequently quarrelled with others. For example, the mother of an 8 years old male child verbalized as,

“He is good and shy by nature. As he is growing older, he is becoming shyer. He takes time to become mixed with others. If someone commits mistakes, he says mamma let them go and I will not say anything. Sometimes, he makes a quarrel with others for their mistakes.”

The personality attributes of rigidity, crying after their mistakes, holding breathing, copying wrongdoings of others, showing fearlessness, non-obedience, beating others, displacing their anger and making others afraid for their wrongdoing were also observed in the behaviours of many children. Moreover, rigid and aggressive be-

haviours, reactivity, friendliness and home-centred wrongdoing were observed in the male children. The mother of a 5 years old male child observed as,

“We have to satisfy all his demands. He is stubborn but also good in studies. If something is forced to be done, he does not follow. It makes him stubborn if we show our anger after his unhappiness. He is very naughty. Once, his friend was saying to him that he would say his father, who was a policeman, to arrest his father. Sometimes, he does accept his mistakes.”

Likewise, the female children also exhibited shyness, irritation and use of immoral language. The mother of a 4.5 years old female child observed as,

“She cries if none of her playmates plays with her. Initially, she does not do anything and starts crying if someone irritates her. She was stubborn when she was young. Now she is not very rigid and likes to play. Sometimes, she beats other children and reports me about such happenings. She shows her unrest and anger if she is asked to stop playing with mobile.”

Some of the female children have also expressed rigidity, anger and irritation after others' wrongdoings. For example, the mother of an 8 years old female child verbalized as,

“She irritates easily. She frequently argues. She does not attend and follow anything while watching TV. She becomes irritated after repeated forbidding.”

Similarly, rigidity, sensitivity and acceptance of their mistakes were common in the reported behaviours of the female children. For example, the mother of a 9.5 years old female child verbalized as,

“She is stubborn by nature. She accepts her mistakes easily. She is very sensitive. If someone says or reproves her, she takes it seriously.”

## **Theme 5: Children's Forgiveness was More Explicit and Easier**

The nature of forgiveness in children was observed to be more overt. The children expressed their forgiveness in a very easy and identifiable manner. Their emotions and cognitive responses could be easily understood. Their forgiveness was expressed in their silence, nodding head, involvement and initiation of play activities. The mother of a 10 years old male child verbalized as,

“He understands that a poor mark in school is wrong and sometimes he hides it.”

Likewise, the mother of a 6 years old male child verbalized as,

“He does not accept his mistakes easily and twists their occurrence. He explicitly says that he has forgiven for others' wrongdoings. He admits his involvement after repeated interrogation in an affectionate manner. He also tells about others' mistakes immediately. He does not retaliate. He also becomes angry, if things are not happening in accordance with his convenience.”

The female children showed their unpleasant feelings and anger, expressed their fears after committing mistakes, forgave others easily and complained about others' mistakes. For example, the mother of a 4.5 years old female child verbalized as,

“She plays with the playmates that suit to her liking. She does show her interest in those who do not play with her. Initially, she does not do anything and starts crying if someone irritates her. She forgives

easily by nodding her head and smiles. She is not very rigid. Sometimes, she beats other children and reports me about such happenings.”

The mother of a 6 years old female child verbalized as,

“She does not follow the instructions. She does not share even small things with her younger brother and blames that he (younger brother) claims ownership for everything. She pretends to study when we are present around her. If we move here and there, she puts her books. She hastily starts studying as soon as she becomes aware of the presence. If someone wants to take anything belonging to her, she refuses and claims that they belong to her.”

The mother of an 8 years old female child verbalized as,

“She frequently quarrels with her brothers. She accepts her mistakes and forgives others for their mistakes. She shows anger if asked about her school homework and stopped watching TV. If someone harms her, she forgives by showing her smiles.”

## Discussion

The findings of the study testified the contention that the nature of transgression and forgiveness in children has a significant role in shaping their life outcomes. Many new attributes pertaining to children's transgression and forgiveness were revealed. Moreover, children's forgiveness evinced some significant consequences for their life outcomes. Theme 1 denoted that children's transgressions were related to the immediate and tangible realities of life. The nature of children's transgression related to mundane and concrete aspects of life concerning vital self-development. For example, beating by parents, denying attending school, lying, beating others, poor school performance and pretending after their wrongdoing reflected the nature of children's transgression. Likewise, non-adherence to others' instructions, non-serious involvement in studies, non-sharing of things and quarrelling with siblings were major examples of transgression observed for children. Children have also been observed to convert their negative feelings into positive feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (McCullough, 2001). Approximately, similar positive consequences of children's forgiveness have also been reported (Rose & Asher, 1999; van der Wal et al., 2014). For example, forgiveness in children may facilitate to restore and re-establish significant relationships critical for their social as well as emotional growth and development (Berndt, 2002).

Theme 2 denoted that significant others played an important role in facilitating the children's forgiveness. Parents, teachers, elder brothers and sisters played a positive role and their efforts facilitated children's forgiveness. The parents, especially mothers, had a significant role in their children's forgiveness.

Theme 3 denoted that children easily accepted their wrongdoing. It was explicitly evident in most of the expressions. Sometimes, children pretended with expressed signs and accepted their wrongdoings. It was observed that the children pretended after committing mistakes in a very identifiable manner.

It was observed that some temperamental, behavioural and personality attributes regulated the comprehension of the wrongdoings of the children (Theme 4). For example, stubborn, non-retaliating attitudes, shyness, non-sociality and quarrelling with others were frequently observed personality attributes that were occurred in the process of their transgression and forgiveness. Likewise, rigidity, copying, fearlessness, non-obedience, aggression, anger, reactivity and friendliness were also observed in many children. Moreover, children's forgive-

ness was more explicit and easier (Theme 5). The nature of forgiveness in children was observed to be more explicit and identifiable through their emotional expressions, verbal and non-verbal behaviours, and easy acceptance of their wrongdoings. It has also been reported in previous studies that the children initially impulsively respond to the offenders and try to harm them in return (Troop-Gordon & Asher, 2005).

A multitude of children's personality characteristics has been reported to be associated with their ability to forgive. For example, agreeableness (Maio et al., 2008), extraversion and conscientiousness (Ahirwar, Tiwari, & Rai, 2019), self-esteem (Flanagan et al., 2012) and defensive retaliatory behaviours have been reported to ease forgiveness of children facing interpersonal transgressions (Eaton et al., 2006). Moreover, individual differences in cognitive ability and impulse control are also associated with children's forgiveness (van der Wal et al., 2014). The nature of relationship between the victim and the offender (van der Wal et al., 2014), liking (Peets, Hodges, & Salmivalli, 2013), values (McCullough, 2008), social preference (van der Wal, Karremans, & Cillessen, 2016) and social standing within peer group (Cillessen et al., 2011) have been closely linked with their affective and behavioural responses relevant for forgiveness.

Up to some extent, similar to the findings of the present study, some previous studies have suggested significant positive (Flanagan et al., 2012; Luchies, Finkel, McNulty, & Kumashiro, 2010; van der Wal et al., 2014, 2016) and negative (Hubbard et al., 2002; Poulin & Boivin, 2000; Rose & Asher, 1999) interpersonal consequences of forgiveness for children. For example, children's non-forgiveness may lead them to involve in retaliation and reactive aggression leading to peer rejection and social withdrawal (Hubbard et al., 2002; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Conversely, forgiveness promotes general satisfaction, stability in friendships and well-being of children (van der Wal et al., 2016). It has been observed that more forgiving children show conciliatory gestures with the transgressors, lowered reciprocal conflict, enhanced well-being and stability of their friendships (Hubbard et al., 2002; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). Similarly, some intrapersonal benefits of forgiveness for children have also been found. For example, more forgiving children show general happiness and satisfaction, increased self-esteem and lowered social anxiety (Flanagan et al., 2012). The findings of the present study showed that some children were reported to be stubborn and rigid in their behaviours towards the offenders that have been approved by earlier studies (van der Wal et al., 2016).

The findings of the present study suggest forgiveness to benefit children in terms of their enhanced quality of relationships, general happiness, satisfaction and well-being similar to the earlier studies (Hubbard et al., 2002; Poulin & Boivin, 2000). The finding of the present study showed that younger children retaliated after an act of offence and they lacked a proper understanding of forgiveness in their early childhood. Approximately, similar observations were reported that younger children exhibited retaliation after being hurt because they lacked essential empathetic understanding, impulse control and self-regulation (Anderson, 2002; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983).

There are some noteworthy strengths of the study that deserve to be mentioned. The findings of the present study reflect significant contributions to the field of children's forgiveness. The data about children's transgressions and forgiveness in this study were collected from their mothers who were full-time caretakers and showed complete familiarity with their children. This methodological innovation merits highlight and may carry strength to attract the attention of future researchers to further verify its empirical usefulness and efficacy for studying children who cannot report about themselves as per the expectations of the scientific studies. This study tries to fill the gap, to some extent, in knowledge in the area where a dearth of research is noticeable on children sam-

ple employing a qualitative method of data collection, processing and analysis. It is worth noting in this regard that the children in India are given emotional, social and behavioural training very dissimilar to American and European children. This study aids specific explanations for understanding forgiveness. More or less, Indian culture is permissive in child-rearing practices where obedience is inculcated by modelling while the younger one obeys the elders. Here physical and emotional punishments are frequently given (it is evident in exclusion from play), but it is not taken as negative emotional consequences by children as there are some supportive figures (maybe other than primary caregivers in the family) who have control over both children and their parents. Sometimes, he or she (other than primary caregivers in the family or a neighbour) refrains the parents from punishment and asks the child to run away from the scene to avoid further punishment leading to emotional upheaval. This is a healthy coping mechanism emulated by children in early age and has positive consequences for life outcomes like reconciliatory behaviours and avoiding unwanted dominance. The findings of the present study also evinced a close link between children's forgiveness and their significant life outcomes. A multitude of personality (friendliness, morality, attitudes, obedience, shyness, etc.), emotional (anger, jealousy, happiness, curiosity, emotion regulation, aspirations, crying), social (play behaviours, small sacrifices, approval, apology, etc.), cognitive (understanding relationships and transgressions, intentions and apology, pretending, assessment of others, as well as of own roles in transgressing situations) and other correlates (socialization practices, role of significant others, role of family and school institutions, etc.) of children's forgiveness were identified through the findings of the present study.

Like all scientific endeavours, this study is also marred by some limitations. The findings of the study require precautions while generalizing due to heterogeneous sample in age and diversity of the nature of Indian society. Small sample size from a limited geographical area may be another limitation of the study. As the data of the study were collected only through a single interaction with the mothers, the generalizations of these findings are suggested to be done carefully. Should the sample and data have been larger, deeper insights about the nature, correlates and mechanisms behind children's transgression and forgiveness may have emerged.

## Major Conclusions

The findings showed that forgiveness had a significant role in understanding the social, emotional and interpersonal development of children. It has been observed that forgiveness in children developed concomitantly to their emotional, cognitive, motor and other abilities. It was also recorded that forgiveness had the potential to understand their performance and various life outcomes. Moreover, the children differed in their understanding and acceptance of wrongdoings that were guided by their liking/disliking, relationship, mood and concreteness. The children were observed to be less aware of the consequences of forgiveness. The transgression was generally physical in nature such as pain and weeping and they generally hold others responsible for wrongdoings. Some personality attributes were also observed to be linked with children's forgiveness. The social, emotional and affiliation needs, as well as play need, exhibited a significant role in children's forgiveness. The understanding of their relative age and relationship with the transgressors were also significant for their forgiveness. Their frequent feeling of positive emotions, happiness and relationship were explicitly observed to be linked with forgiveness. The findings of the study constitute initial clues to the nature of children's forgiveness and need further exploration.

## Implications and Directions for Future Researchers

The findings of the study have important implications to understand the nature and dynamics of children's forgiveness for their life outcomes. The findings may be significant for researchers, counsellors and the public at large. The future researchers can further the understanding of children's forgiveness employing relevant psychological constructs such as spirituality, self-concept, emotional intelligence, positive health practices, emotion regulation, self-compassion and well-being. The use of mixed methods will help improve the understanding of children's forgiveness. The present findings can also be cross verified in other cultures. Intervention plans may also be developed using forgiveness by future researchers.

## Notes

i) The different parts of the same transcriptions represent different themes and subthemes with distinctive features and they have been repeated knowingly to make sense of the themes and their descriptions that had occurred in specific contexts.

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## Competing Interests

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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