Forgiveness and healing

***Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven"* (Mt 18:21-22, RSV).**

Beth, a 9-year-old, had carefully tucked her birthday presents, including a new CD player, into her closet, and went out to dinner with her mom. Later that night she went to get her CD player out and realized it was gone. She told her mom, and both of them knew instantly what had happened. They had not locked the back door when they went out.

They felt pretty sure, because of some other things that had happened recently, that several boys from the neighborhood had come in and stolen the CD player. What should they do?

A week later, the boys' parents had been contacted, a very understanding juvenile officer had been involved, and the boys had not only admitted what they had done but had "paid back" for their crime, returning the CD player and doing jobs around Beth's house. No arrests had been made, and restitution had been achieved.

But Beth wasn't satisfied. She needed more healing, and she decided the way to do it was to throw a Forgiveness Party. With her mother's support, she invited the boys and their families to a party in her backyard, celebrating the fact that what was broken had now been made whole.

While this is based on a true story, it may not seem realistic for many of us. What is realistic and important for all of us is that forgiveness means taking a giant step toward making something whole once more, and that forgiveness involves lifting a burden from everyone involved.

As we work with children to introduce and reinforce

forgiveness, in the spirit of that element of Catholic social teaching that calls us to respect the dignity of every person, there are several principles and strategies to keep in mind:

- Never be afraid to say “I’m sorry” or to show your feelings with a hug or touch.
- Praise children when they are able to say they’re sorry, but avoid forcing them to apologize.
- Read and discuss “The Story of Ruby Bridges,” by Robert Coles (Scholastic), a powerful, true story of forgiveness from a 6-year-old girl who was one of the first African-American children to integrate New Orleans schools.
- Another kind of ritual is to encourage family members to write a grudge they are ready to let go of on a piece of paper and put it into a “grudge jar.” Then, at a specific time, those grudges are taken out, ripped up and thrown away.