



Seminar

Nurturing Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

2 July 2018 – Club Suisse de la Presse

Route de Ferney 106, 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

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REPORT



The seminar on “Nurturing Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence” was held on 2 July at the Club Suisse de la Presse in Geneva and brought together over 50 participants from multilateral organisations, faith-based organisations, religious leaders, international NGOs, experts, and other practitioners. The aim of the seminar was to discuss and share good practices on early childhood development and socio-emotional learning, as well as address the importance of creating safe environments for nurturing spirituality to help children develop and thrive to their fullest potential. The discussions highlighted the central role of religious communities in supporting families and communities in this endeavour.

The seminar was organised by Arigatou International, in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services, Early Childhood Peace Consortium, Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace, International Network of Engaged

Buddhists, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Office of the Special Representative to the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence Against Children, Pastoral da Criança Internacional, Sarvodaya Movement Sri Lanka, Shanti Ashram India, UNICEF, Institute of Religious Studies – University of Montreal, World Bank, World Council of Churches and World Vision International.

Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe, Director of Arigatou International – Geneva, welcomed the participants and provided key contextual facts including the latest statistics on the incidence of violence against children. According to the most recent UNICEF report, close to 300 million (3 in 4) children worldwide aged 2 to 4 experience violent discipline by their caregivers on a regular basis, and 250 million children (around 6 in 10) are punished by physical means. Ms. Uribe stressed the importance of working together to end violence against children, nurturing spirituality to break the cycles of violence, and joining forces with religious communities to allow children to flourish and thrive.

KEYNOTE

Address by Dr. Kezevino Aram, President of Shanti Ashram, a grassroots Gandhian organization working on integral rural development in India

Dr. Aram dedicated her address to presenting the latest findings in the realm of early childhood development and the impact of violence and deprivation on children's development, highlighting the positive effects of nurturing spirituality in early childhood. She emphasized the critical importance of early years, explaining that it is between the ages of 0 and 8 that 80% of personal character and brain architecture is formed. Brain architecture is the foundation for all future learning, behaviour, and health, and the latest neuroscience findings confirm that adverse experiences early in life, such as exposure to violence or deprivation, can impair brain architecture, with negative effects lasting into adulthood and impacting individual's participation in society and their ability to be active members of their communities. Dr. Aram then cited the works of Professors Sendhil Mullainathan and Amartya Sen on the effects of poverty, inequality, and deprivation on human development.

Dr. Aram emphasised the importance of creating holistic early childhood programming that takes the ecosystem of the child into consideration: children live in interconnected worlds (peers, family, school, community) that shape how they behave, learn, and interact. Dr. Aram continued her address by focusing on the importance of nurturing spirituality in children by creating safe spaces for children to reflect and dialogue, including by creating opportunities

for intergenerational conversations within faith communities in which all children should be active participants and critical thinkers. It is in this regard that she quoted Mahatma Gandhi: "I believe that if one man gains spiritually, the whole world gains with him".

Dr. Aram continued by underscoring the importance of allowing children to challenge old assumptions, and recalled how a 12-year-old boy stood up during a dialogue at Ashram to speak about equal opportunities for girls and boys. Dr. Aram particularly emphasised that "positive disruption" can be a catalyst for change by breaking the cycles of violence, inequality, and deprivations that affect children. Moments of positive disruption expose new possibilities, and challenge, for instance, the normalization of violence during child upbringing to re-imagine the future for our children.

Dr. Aram congratulated Arigatou International for launching the Consortium as a timely and much needed initiative which contributes to the holistic development and well-being of the child. She also congratulated the participating organizations and stated that each institution has a key role to play and an ethical imperative to collaborate, as people of faith, to nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood.

PANEL I: NURTURING EARLY CHILDHOOD – CHALLENGING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



The discussions in Panel I opened with a reflection on the ecosystem of the child in relation to the identity formation of the child.

Mr. Friedrich Affolter, Education Expert for Risk Informed Programming at UNICEF, emphasised the importance of a systemic understanding and holistic programming for children's well-being and violence prevention, considering both the micro individual level and macro level of government policies. He stressed the importance of creating safe spaces for children to learn, explore, and experience positive belonging. It is particularly important to nurture positive relationships and connections. However, caretakers, caregivers and communities often experience structural violence. To break the cycle of violence, we must refer to the ecosystem of the child and implement interventions that address systemic issues at all levels. Mr. Affolter continued by

stressing that faith-based organizations are well positioned to advocate for holistic interventions with their governments.

The ensuing panel discussion focused on the effects and implications of violence on children's development and well-being. Mr. Andrew Claypole, Senior Adviser, Office Special Representative to the Secretary General on Violence Against Children, presented evidence from the [2006 Study on Violence against Children](#) and its recommendations. Mr. Claypole highlighted that violence against children is a global phenomenon and stressed the long-term impacts of violence, including competency deficits in adulthood and the consequences related to the cycle of violence for both victims and perpetrators. The investments made in early childhood for the prevention of violence can break this cycle.



Mr. Claypole also underlined the legal obligations of the Convention of Rights of the Child and the moral and human rights imperatives that ending violence against children constitutes. He emphasized the economic costs of violence against children, citing the [2014 Overseas Development Institute & Child Fund Report: "The Cost and Economic Impact of Violence Against Children"](#), which estimates the cost of violence against children to be \$7 trillion USD. This massive cost is higher than the initial investment required to prevent much of this violence. This estimation also only considers the direct costs of addressing violence against children and not the loss in human capital, which is equally important to consider.

Mr. Claypole concluded by recognizing that there are currently many positive practices that exist to prevent and end violence against children, and welcomed future endeavours of the Consortium for very comprehensive interventions in this respect.

The panel continued with a reflection on the importance of nurturing values and spirituality in early years. Ms. Caroline Arnold, Early Childhood Expert and Former Director of Education, Aga Khan Foundation, focused on the importance of nurturing values and spirituality, especially in our fragile and fractured times, where children are often equipped with knowledge, but not

with core human values. Nurturing care has fundamental intergenerational implications on well-being, productivity, and social cohesion. It is fundamental to support caregivers in creating safe spaces for children for inner self-reflection and to nurture compassion and empathy. She stressed that nurturing care must be a synergy between protection and safety; a stimulating environment with opportunities to learn, coupled with affectionate and responsive interactions to develop human values such as compassion, empathy, honesty, which are central to all human faiths and humanism. Ms. Arnold cited the work of Professor James J. Heckman on how personal qualities powerfully predict well-being.

Ms. Arnold also warned against the current trends in early childhood programming that largely focus on academic scores and cognitive skills at the expense of nurturing values and attitudes.

The discussion proceeded with Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne – Secretary General of the Sarvodaya Movement, who described the experience of the Sarvodaya Movement working with families in Sri Lanka, and discussed how spirituality and interconnectedness are nurtured in children within the Buddhist perspective, borrowing spirituality from sacred spaces and bringing the concept into schools and homes.





Dr. Vinya then stressed the role of holistic and integral programming in supporting families: he stated that the economic hardship of parents often constitutes the main obstacle to creating nurturing and safe environments for children. He also reflected on the need to raise awareness on the consequences of violence in the case of teachers that use corporal punishment. Current scientific knowledge on the impacts of violent discipline has not yet reached caretakers and teachers, and we must mobilize to create more awareness on the long-lasting effects of a violent upbringing.

The discussion then focussed on the concepts of “children ready for school” and “children ready for life”, with reference to target 4.2: “all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education”. It was noted that this target has in itself become a challenge when it comes to supporting holistic early childhood programming that is not solely focused on cognitive learning. Parents often push for their child’s curriculum to solely be focused on cognitive learning because they believe this is how their children will become successful.

The Q&A session which followed the discussion focused on the need to strengthen the capacities and change behaviours of the adults in contact

with children, including by targeting systemic issues such as stress factors (e.g. poverty and lack of infrastructure) that often trigger violent responses from parents and caretakers towards children.

Ms. Caroline Arnold continued the discussion on the topic of systemic issues by reflecting on the scope of early childhood development programs that are available. These range from working with families to working with communities and policymakers in order to challenge structural issues that are influencing the contexts in which children grow. Ms. Arnold stressed that in terms of systemic influence, faith communities have a vital role to play as they can use their moral authority to hold governments accountable to addressing the structural issues affecting the development of children.



Mr. Friedrich Affolter then spoke about the connections between interventions that focus on the whole child (spiritual, cognitive, physical, social and emotional components) on the family, and on building peaceful societies. In terms of the latter, governments can distribute social services in such a way that people come together to transform relationships in conflict affected societies. He cited the experience of Ivory Coast, where UNICEF and Caritas provided kindergartens for children of all ethnicities and inter-ethnic literacy classes for caretakers, in 17 highly divided villages. This project created

a spiral of positive transformations providing safe learning environments for children of all ethnicities, safe spaces for their caretakers (mostly mothers), but also for restoring relationships across different ethnicities.



Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne followed by suggesting using interfaith and intrafaith dialogue to examine the theological reflections on issues affecting children. He gave a practical example of how “Jataka or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Lives” can be read with a child rights approach. These stories have been turned into cartoons and other media to convey the positive messages of the Jataka stories in promoting child rights and child well-being to children. It is through these reflections and by examining religious teachings that harmful practices towards children can be challenged, as well as by working more closely with religious communities to challenge rooted behaviours and attitudes that justify violence in early childhood.

Mr. Andrew Claypole then presented several initiatives at the global level that are successfully and effectively addressing violence against children. Mr. Claypole also mentioned the role of the 2030 agenda to ending violence against children (target 16.2) and fostering quality early childhood development (target 4.2). He drew attention to the fact that 2019

will be a key year with regards to the review of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda, as Goal 16 and Goal 4 will be reviewed. In addition, the 2019 General Assembly will review the overall progress on the entire Agenda. He also recalled that 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that the Consortium constitutes an opportunity to influence these global processes.

The Q&A session then discussed concrete ways of working with religious communities to advocate for early childhood policies. The session also touched upon the role of the private sector and how civil society organizations and faith communities can engage more closely with the private sector to safeguard the well-being of children, including by developing toys and games that transmit positive and transformative narratives.



PANEL II: ROUNDTABLE DIALOGUES ON STRENGTHENING FAMILIES TO NURTURE VALUES & SPIRITUALITY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

This session looked into current knowledge on early childhood development and nurturing values and spirituality in early years, as well as the factors and conditions needed to develop nurturing care in early childhood, with a focus on the family and the community. Dr. Mustafa Ali, Secretary General of the Global Network of Religions for Children of Arigatou International, moderated the panel.

Dr. Ilham Nasser, Expert on Early Childhood, presented the findings of her recent research which examined nurturing values and spirituality in early years. Her review highlighted that religion and spirituality have a positive influence on emotional and physical well-being during childhood and adolescence (Johnson, 2008; King & Benson, 2006; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008). The findings also demonstrated that spirituality provides meaning and purpose in life; it strengthens inner resources in young children and increases positive interconnectedness (Kielty, 2017). Spiritual wellness is suggested to act as a protective factor that is strongly correlated with resilience, staying on track in school, and higher inner guidance, especially in adolescence. It is also a protective factor against depression, suicide, and risky behaviour in youth. However, Dr. Nasser also pointed to some of the challenges and gaps in this research field in terms of the limited amount of research available and in terms of the evidence generated. In particular, she recalled that most of the research frameworks identified are based on Christian beliefs and practices and that there



is a lack of research on spirituality in general, and in Muslim societies in particular. There has been some research on Mormonism in the United States. She also stated that the findings on spirituality are often complex and diverse, and pointed to the issue of lack of clarity between the use of spirituality and religiosity as research constructs. Spirituality as a concept transcends religiosity, but may not capture the way people live their faith and is not operationalized in reviewed studies. There is also no clarity on measurement and methodology of the research.

The panel discussion continued with Dr. Alexander Butchart, Coordinator, Violence Prevention at the World Health Organization, presenting the recently launched [Nurturing Care Framework](#). The Framework provides an evidence-based roadmap for action, and outlines how policies and services can support parents, families, other caregivers and communities by providing nurturing care for young children. The Framework builds upon state-of-the-art

evidence of how child development unfolds and of the effective policies and interventions that can improve early childhood development. It describes how a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach can promote and strengthen the nurturing care of young children, what the guiding principles for doing so are, what strategic actions are needed, and the monitoring of targets and milestones that are essential to progress. Dr. Butchart also highlighted challenges in terms of advocating for governments to scale up their programming for nurturing care. He then pointed to the connections between the Nurturing Care Framework and the [INSPIRE package](#), including the newly developed [INSPIRE handbook](#), with details for the interventions across the seven strategies.

The session continued with participants further discussing these topics in two separate roundtable discussions. Some of the key items discussed during the roundtables included:

- Co-creating parenting programs with parents and caregivers that focus not solely on health, nutrition, and child upbringing practices, but also on children's spiritual development and emotional learning and on the impact of violence on children's development.

- Creating spaces for families to come together and share practices, experiences, challenges, and engage in dialogue.
- Involving fathers more actively and challenging their patriarchal role. For example, there exists a good practice in Sri Lanka with a spiritual approach to motherhood in which pregnant women are invited to meditation sessions and it is compulsory that the father attend the sessions together with the mother.



- Analysing the *deculturalization* and the *decommunization* that children are exposed to, especially due to Internet and "cyber life." This does not only affect Global South countries but also Western societies. For example, violent extremism is proof that no matter how many efforts that children who grow up or are born in Western countries make to fit in their society, they are discriminated against for one reason or another; other sub-communities then take advantage of this and make them feel part of something bigger. Religious communities have a role to play in raising awareness about the ethics behind the use of virtual life and identity.



PANEL III: EXPERIENCES WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

This session aimed to learn from concrete experiences of implementation, examining the impact of these interventions, sharing the learnings, and identifying good practices.

Ms. Nafisa Shekhova, Senior Advisor, Education, from the Aga Khan Foundation presented the achievements of the Madrasa Early Childhood Development Program. In the 1980s, leaders in under-privileged Muslim communities expressed concern that their children were falling behind in school. Without an education, they feared their children would remain in poverty. The Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) worked with local educators, community leaders and parents to create four pilot Madrasa pre-schools in Mombasa, Kenya. These pilot schools would later specialise in a holistic approach to early childhood development, guided by a curriculum that integrated key religious values and teachings. [Read full presentation.](#)



Dr. Selamawit Tadesse, Technical Advisor/Early Childhood Development and Education at Catholic Relief Services, presented the SCORE ECD Project, a partnership program between Catholic Relief Services and Women Religious in Kenya, Malawi, and Zambia. She discussed

how to concretely infuse spiritual values into guiding principles for early childhood programs, including by building the technical and organizational capacity of women religious and congregations, so that they expand the provision of quality early childhood development services. [Read full presentation.](#)



Ms. Neelam Fida, Global Child Protection and Inclusion Advisor from Islamic Relief Worldwide, highlighted that 84% of the world's population identified themselves as spiritual, and that Muslims account for 23% of the religious community and have a key role to play in ending violence against children. She presented Islamic Relief's partnership with World Vision International around the adaptation of the "Channels of Hope" methodology. Channels of Hope is an interactive, facilitated process to create a safe space for faith leaders and faith communities to learn, share, and debate, using religious scriptures. It reaches the root causes and deepest convictions that impact attitudes, norms, values, and practices towards the most vulnerable of people. Ms. Fida also shared an

alternative, faith-sensitive integrated approach to gender-based violence and child protection, which Islamic Relief have piloted in Pakistan, Mali, and Niger. This integrated method uses a multi-faceted approach by involving professionals, practitioners, faith leaders and community representatives who play a critical role in providing a protective environment for communities and creating agents of change to help improve community protection. A participatory approach of men, women, and children, and building on existing social networks has been helpful to address some of the very harmful attitudes, norms, values and practices that contribute to creating barriers for women and children.

Next, Ms. Vera Leal, Senior Program Officer at Arigatou International – Geneva, introduced the program on Ethics Education for Children: The Learning to Live Together Programme. The program aims to create spaces and opportunities for children to learn to live in solidarity with people of different religions, cultures, and ethnicities; to empower them, to nurture their spirituality, their sense of belonging to a common humanity; and to enhance their innate ability to make positive contributions to transform their communities based on values that promote respect for their own culture and beliefs as well as for those of others. [Read full presentation.](#)

Ms. Frederique Seidel, Special Advisor on Child Rights from the World Council of Churches followed by presenting the Churches' Commitments to Children. The document identifies areas in which churches have a particular ability to make a positive impact on the lives of children, in churches and in the wider societies in which we live. Specific commitments are presented for reflection and action which can prompt essential conversations and new

resolve about the sacredness of all life, and the special responsibilities we carry towards children. [Read full presentation.](#)

Dr. Nana Danelia, Spiritual Nurture of Children & Programming Advisor for Faith, Strategy, Programming and Impact at World Vision International, presented the Celebrating Families program. This is a unique World Vision born project model and has been broadly implemented in World Vision Area Programs and fragile contexts in 60 countries since 2013. The program primarily contributes to the World Vision Strategy 2030, Child Well-Being Objectives & SDGs (#5 & #16). [Read full presentation.](#)

The ensuing Q&A session focused on the importance of initiating and engaging in dialogue, such as by creating spaces for religious leaders to reflect and share across different religious traditions. It is crucial to create safe environments to harness the trust and loyalty of faith leaders.



PANEL IV: SOCIAL AND CULTURAL NORMS THAT STRENGTHEN VALUES AND SPIRITUALITY IN CHILDREN OR JUSTIFY VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN –THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The panel opened with reflections from Prof. Anantanand Rambachan on challenging traditions that see the child as an inherently flawed human being, and condone the use of a violent upbringing because it is believed that these innate flaws can only be rectified by the use of violence and fear. He continued by reflecting on other traditions that perceive the child as a flower that needs to be nurtured and that has an innate potential that is only positive. In his reflections, Prof. Anantanand insisted that, moving forward, we must promote the vision of a flourishing child in order to complement our work of overcoming violence against children. Religious traditions are important sources of perceptions of what a flourishing child can be. He concluded by highlighting the importance that faith communities and religious leaders be aware of the scientific and empirical findings on the development of the child, and to be informed about the impact of the family and community on the well-being of the child in order to learn good practices and to understand which practices can be detrimental to the development of the child.

Dr. Imam Rashid Omar continued the reflection on the role of faith leaders by introducing the peace building paradigm triangle by John Paul Lederach, to reflect on the role of religious leaders as being in a mid-range leadership position, strategically in contact with both the grassroots and the top leadership range. He introduced the concepts of structural and cultural violence from the sociologist Johan

Galtung to stress that religious leaders must maintain a clear distance from the state to hold those in power accountable for their moral and political mandates and to avoid serving as legitimating forces for cultural and social violence. Dr. Rashid concluded that faith leaders must be open to the “jurisprudence of reality” and allow their constituencies, especially children, to speak and be heard, and pay careful attention to their opinions in order to transform our social and cultural norms.



Mr. Friedrich Affolter continued by reflecting on behavioural change and the transformation of norms. He shared concrete examples, lessons learned, and challenges from UNICEF work in Uganda, South Sudan, and Somalia.

Mr. Affolter highlighted that behavioural change is a timely process and that it is important to allow space for thinking, sharing, reflecting

and analysing current norms that need to be transformed. Behavioural change cannot happen in schools but must be a community-driven process, and faith leaders have a key role to play with their moral authority and influence within communities. The use of media can also be fundamental to tell positive stories and change perceptions and attitudes.

Rev. Fred Nyabera, Director of End Child Poverty, Arigatou International, closed the panel discussion and provided concrete recommendations for a theological framework to collaborate with religious communities to challenge social and cultural norms that foster gender-based violence from early years and encourage gender equality



in the upbringing of children.

Rev. Nyabera then proposed a framework for fostering theological reflections and actions that promote human dignity as a universal value, and that is catered towards children, that fosters the meaningful engagement of men and women to end gender-based violence and discrimination, and that allows for nurturing parental skills. Parents are crucial role models and thus the promotion of gender equality, counter-narratives to gender stereotypes, and attitudes and cultural myths in the home is of fundamental importance. Rev. Nyabera also stressed the importance of authenticity of the

theology of the norms we want to transform, the need to have primary and secondary language and the relevance of the theology to the issues



of the day and consider the applicability of our theologies and contextualize them.

The ensuing open discussion focused on the evolution of the concept of family, including reflecting on LGBT families, the view of the child across different religious traditions, and sharing other experiences of integrating rights-based approaches when working with religious communities.

The seminar concluded with remarks from Ms. Rebecca Rios-Kohn, Director of Arigatou International New York, who invited participants to extend these reflections past the duration of the seminar. Ms. Rios-Kohn ended by once again affirming the important role that religious communities can play in striving for the well-being of children.





FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT US

Arigatou International

Arigatou International — Geneva

1, Rue de Varembé 1202 Geneva, Switzerland

Tel: +41 22 734 9410 Fax: +41 22 734 1926

🌐 ethicseducationforchildren.org

✉ geneva@arigatouinternational.org

f [/EthicsEducationforChildren](https://www.facebook.com/EthicsEducationforChildren)

🐦 [@arigatougeneva](https://twitter.com/arigatougeneva)

**"May every day find every
one of us continually
embraced in growing peace."**

*—Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President of Arigatou
International, September 21, 2015*

Arigatou International

Arigatou International — Geneva
1, Rue de Varembé 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
Tel: +41 22 734 9410 Fax: +41 22 734 1926
geneva@arigatouinternational.org