

INSPIREd Faith Communities:

Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early
Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

INDIA



Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in
Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

About the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

The Consortium, convened by Arigatou International, brings together civil society and faith-based organizations, religious communities, multilateral organizations, academia and individual experts to foster collaboration, share good practises and develop evidence-based and innovative approaches to integrate values-based education and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence and the holistic development of children.

About INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children

INSPIRE is an evidence-based technical package to support countries in their efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. It identifies a select group of strategies that have shown success in reducing violence against children. These strategies include implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills.

https://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/

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The International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence against Children is contributing to the implementation of the INSPIRE strategies through the organization of round table discussions on nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence in the framework of the project INSPIREd Faith Communities. The national round table discussions¹ aim to increase awareness of violence against children in early childhood among religious communities and their networks. The discussions also aim to engage these stakeholders to strengthen norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive, and gender-equitable relations that contribute to reducing parenting practices that violate the dignity of

the child. The reflections and ideas shared in this booklet derive from the preparation process and the discussions at the round table, which took place in Coimbatore, India on 11 and 12 April 2019.

On behalf of the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence against Children, Arigatou International thanks the INSPIRE Fund for providing technical advice and generous financial support for the organization of the round table and the development of this booklet.

¹ The round table discussions took place in Sri Lanka (February), India (April), Lebanon (May), Kenya (May), and Brazil (June).

WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET ABOUT?

This booklet was designed to raise awareness about the importance of children's well-being during the early years, and the support needed from parents, caregivers, educators, and the community to provide nurturing care.

The booklet is based on the reflections of local religious leaders and other stakeholders in relation to the context of children in Sri Lanka. It aspires to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood, reflect about the impact of violence on children, and inspire change at home, school, religious places of worship, and the community as a whole.

Who is it for?

The intended audience of this booklet are the members of religious communities, which include women, men, youth, children, leaders, and lay members; as well as civil society actors who work with religious communities.

What are the objectives of the booklet?



Raise awareness among our community members on the issues related to violence against children and the importance of nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood.



Jointly and individually, reflect on our own theological understandings of the child, the notion of the dignity of the child and their spirituality, and the meaning of non-violence in child upbringing.



Initiate dialogue in our communities to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood.



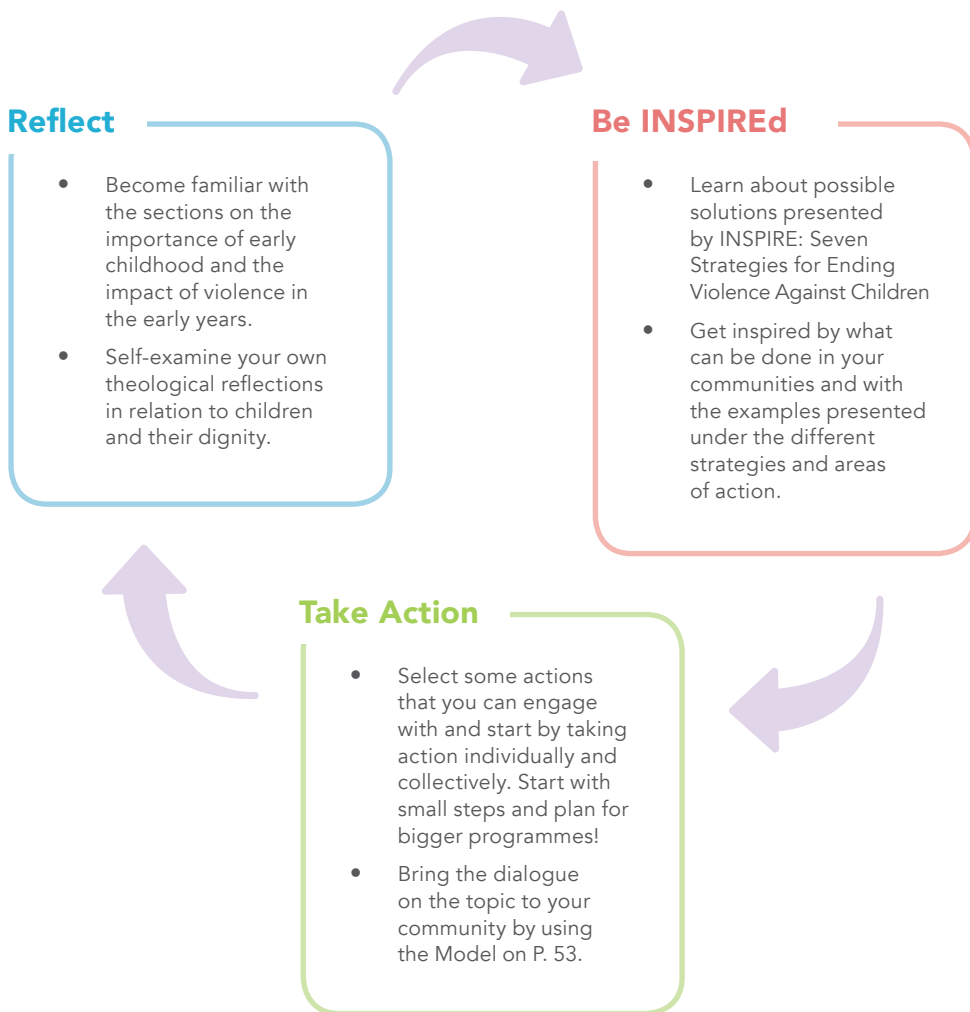
Influence the transformation of attitudes and behaviours around child upbringing that affect the dignity of the child.



Start concrete actions to support parents, caregivers, and educators to raise children in nurturing and caring environments, free of violence.

How can this booklet be used?

This booklet was designed to encourage reflection, suggest concrete solutions, share examples, and INSPIRE individual and collective actions. The diagram below shows how you can use the booklet by following its different sections.



Along the way take note of your reflections, questions and ideas for action!

WHY IS EARLY CHILDHOOD SO CRITICAL?

Before a child is born, an embryo takes a nine-month journey in the mother's womb, full of hopes and potentials. After this miraculous journey, the baby is born and develops rapidly into a person who is ready to learn, create, and engage with others. It is no coincidence that childhood is recognized with special significance in our religions.

Childhood has a critical importance from the religious perspective, as this is when children are introduced to their families' religious beliefs and practices, and immense care and love is given to nurture their spirituality. In the Hindu tradition, there are 16 samskaras or rites of passage to create a lasting impression on the minds of children. Out of these 16 samskaras, two are performed during the mother's pregnancy and eight are performed during early childhood. The purpose is to create a positive impact on the child, and to remind adults to acknowledge that the life of a child is something precious to take care of.

In Islam, the Qur'an gives the utmost value to children by describing them through different words. A child is a gift from God (Hiba)², an adornment of life (Zeenah)³, a great blessing (Ni'imah)⁴, and is regarded as a protector or friend who carries legacy (Waleeh).⁵ Through these powerful words, the Qur'an reminds us

of how blessed we are to have children, and it sets the minds of parents and other caregivers to see them as blessings and not as a burden.

In Christianity, Jesus taught his disciples that children are the most important members in the Kingdom of God. He set children as role models for adults to emulate their humility. At one point, the disciples asked Jesus, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'⁶ Jesus placed a little child in their midst and said that they must learn to be like the child if they want to become members of the Kingdom of God. In Matthew 18:3–4, we learn that Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'⁷ Jesus also strongly urged his disciples not to discriminate children from receiving his blessings, and promoted their rightful inclusion into the Kingdom of God.⁸ As a child, Jesus himself grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.⁹ This is a pointer to the intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual well-being that is necessary for the holistic nurturing of all children.

In Buddhism, the concept of impermanence reminds us that young children are in a continuous state of change and that to love

2 *The Qur'an* 14:39.

3 *The Qur'an* 18:46.

4 *The Qur'an* 16:72.

5 *The Qur'an* 19:5–6.

6 *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition*, Matthew 18:1.

7 *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3–4.

8 *The Holy Bible*, Mark 10:13–16.

9 *The Holy Bible*, Luke 2:52.

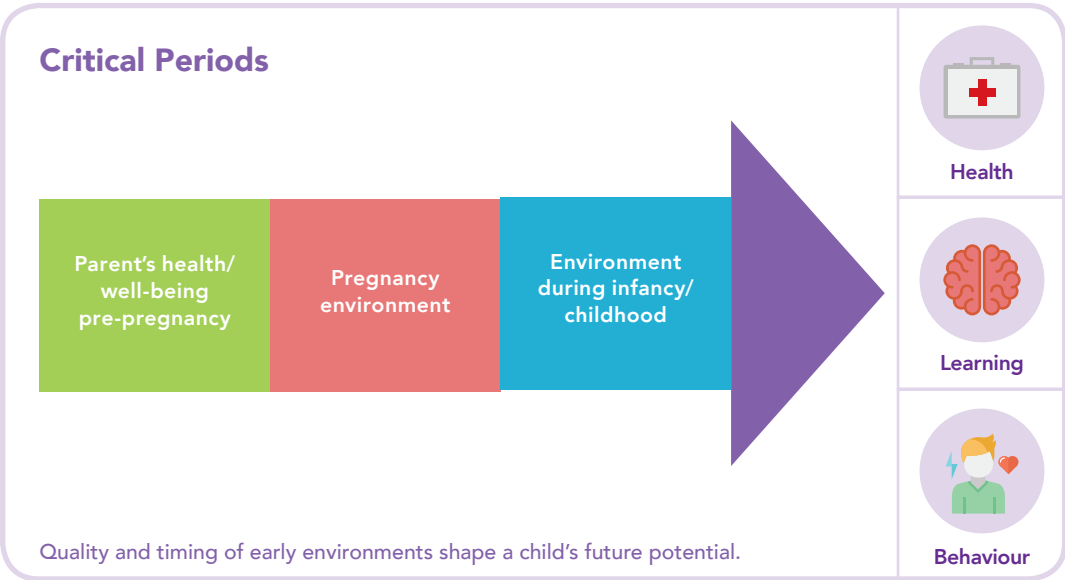
children is also to lose them as they grow up. Children, therefore, offer us the challenge of loving without attachment, as we allow them to discover a path in life that helps them to develop to their full potential and achieve happiness and fulfilment. This calls parents and caregivers to practise Dharma—or Buddhist teachings—in their child-upbringing practices, by upholding and supporting children and creating a loving environment for them to thrive. In this practice of Dharma, our children become teachers as well, as Buddha’s teachings are only transmitted in reciprocal relationships. To take care of a child, adults need to work on themselves to transform the qualities of their minds.

To support children’s development from conception to eight years of age in terms of their cognitive, physical, language, socio-emotional, motor development, and spiritually, there are three critical windows of opportunity.

These are:

- 1. Pre-pregnancy, during which the health and well-being of the future parents influence the development of the baby.
- 2. Pregnancy, during which the development of the baby is guaranteed to occur under optimal conditions.
- 3. Infancy and early childhood.

One of the most impressive facts about early childhood is constituted by the development of the brain. Only recently has neuroscience been able to measure the development of the brain and to study those factors that can contribute or hinder healthy brain development. The brain is the only organ not fully developed at birth. Although the brain starts to develop about a few weeks after conception, infancy and early childhood are especially critical in determining the well-being of the child.



The quality of care that children receive during these early periods directly affects their lifelong health, capacity to learn, and overall productivity. This coincides with the preschool age period when children spend most of their time at home or in childcare facilities, developing a sense of self, learning about everything that happens around them, and exploring the world.

Early childhood is when children start understanding who they are and who the others around them are.

Science also tells us that while our genes, passed on to us by our biological parents, establish the broad basis of human development, the environment where children grow up helps form who they grow to be. Together, they shape the quality of brain architecture and establish either a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health, and behaviour that follow.

In other words, the experiences children have during childhood largely determine the kind of person they become. Healthy, happy, and well-nourished children that grow up in an environment that is free of violence will become happy and supportive adults and parents who raise their children in similar ways.

Non-violence can be nurtured, taught, and learned across generations, just like violence.

The family is the first school to learn human values, where children learn to socialise, to listen, to share, to support, to respect, to help, and to live together. It is in the family that we are taught to break away from our naturally egotistical tendencies.

– Archbishop Felix Machado of Vasai



Keep in Mind

THE PROCESS OF BRAIN FORMATION

During early childhood, the brain forms and refines a complex network of connections. The process of forming the connections is both biologically and experience-driven. It is the constant interplay between our experiences, opportunities, and social interactions and genetics that shapes our brains. The connections in the brain are called synapses, and these synaptic connections form the basis of a person's lifelong capacity not only in terms of learning but also in terms of developing habits, internalizing values, and building positive relations with others.

In the first months after birth, in a baby's brain, synapse formation happens at an astonishing speed of 1,000–10,000 synapses per second in response to the baby's sensing the surrounding environment. As the child gets older, the pathways that are commonly used are reinforced while others are 'shutdown' or diminished. This process of synaptic formation is critical for functional development, such as hearing, language, and cognitive functions. After two years of birth, the speed of synapses slows down as pathways are being consolidated.

The first two years of a child's life have a significant influence on the development of physical, intellectual, emotional, and social capacities. It is in this light that infants (from birth to two years of age) need a many positive

and nurturing experiences when their brain is developing rapidly. Parents and caregivers have a critical responsibility since this vital period is largely spent at home with them.

Religious Rituals and Celebrations in the Early Years

Many religious rituals and celebrations take place during this period, such as the naming ceremony, visits to places of worship for a special prayer for health and well-being, the first haircut, the first solid meal, and the first reading of the holy scripture, to name a few. During this time, parents grow into parenthood that is rooted in their religious and cultural traditions. These religious practices can help foster children's well-being and pass onto them ethical values that can develop as the foundations for spiritual nourishing, which can serve later in life as a source of strength to stand firm when things get difficult in life's journey. These ethical foundations enable us to think and act in ways that are honest, empathetic, and responsible.

The Importance of the Prenatal Period in our Religious Traditions

The prenatal months are fundamental for the development of the child; the stimulation of the child in the uterus is essential for the healthy development. In the uterus, the development of the child's brain is mostly influenced by genetic factors as well as by neurotoxins (if any, thus the recommendation to avoid alcohol consumption during pregnancy). But we also know that from about the third month in the womb, the child is sensitive to stimulation. The child can be affected by any emotional and psychological pressure that the mother experiences before and during pregnancy.

There are many religious practices for expecting mothers, including prayers, singing, and emotional support by religious leaders. These religious practices highlight the importance and sacredness of these early moments of life.

The Holy Qur'an explains the relationship between sorrow and pregnancy in the story of Maryam, pointing out that a pregnant woman should be surrounded by a conducive environment and feel happy and pleased, as the opposite can have a negative impact on her baby.

In the Hindu tradition, the Hindu Vedas speak about the development of the senses of the baby starting at three months in the womb. For this reason, great importance is placed on the influence of prayers, music, and other stimulation of the baby in the uterus. Pregnant women are encouraged to surround themselves with soft, gentle music to help the baby develop its senses and to pray three times a day to nurture the child's spiritual development.

Pregnancy is a key symbol in Christianity with the miraculous conception of Christ and the pregnancy of Mary being the central and founding premises of Christianity.



Get Inspired

INTEGRATED CHILD DEVELOPMENT SERVICES IN INDIA

Early childhood development has been central to the national policies of India since 1975 when the world's largest integrated early childhood programme was launched.

Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) is run by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, with over 40,000 centres nationwide. Children in the age group of zero to six years constitute around 158 million of the population of India.

The ICDS scheme was introduced on a nationwide scale to upgrade the nutritional and health status of children (0–6 years); to develop a framework to ensure the adequate physical, psychological, and social development of the child; and to minimize the incidence of morbidity, malnutrition, school dropout, and mortality. It was also introduced to establish effective collaboration among the different departments working to promote child development; and finally, to enable mothers to participate actively to meet the health and nutritional needs of the child through proper nutrition and health education.

UNICEF helped launch the ICDS programme and continues to provide financial and technical assistance along with the World Bank. The programme today covers over 4.8 million expectant and nursing mothers and over 23 million children under the age of six. Of these children, more than half participate in early learning activities.

The purpose of ICDS is holistic and includes the improvement of the health, nutrition, and development of children. The programme offers health, nutrition, and hygiene education to mothers; early stimulation and learning; non-formal preschool education to children aged three to six; supplementary feeding for all children and pregnant and nursing mothers; growth monitoring and promotion; and links to primary healthcare services such as immunization and vitamin A supplements.

Source: Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. More information is available and can be accessed and downloaded at <https://icds-wcd.nic.in>

INSPIREd Faith Communities: Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

Violence experienced by children can be direct and indirect; both affect them. Every year, children worldwide experience physical punishment from their caregivers (parents, teachers, other adults) as a form of direct violence. Globally, it is estimated that close to 300 million (three in four) children between the ages of two and four experience violent discipline (physical punishment and/or psychological aggression) by their caregivers on a regular basis, and 250 million (around six in ten) are punished by physical means.¹⁰

As a form of indirect violence, children frequently witness domestic violence and often learn that violence is an acceptable and socially approved behaviour. A study shows that worldwide, one in four (176 million) children under the age of five live with a mother who is a victim of intimate partner violence.¹¹

Another form of indirect violence is structural violence. Structural violence is a form of violence in which the social institutions and structures perpetuate inequity. For example, when social structures such as economic, political, medical, and legal systems are designed to have a disproportionately negative impact on particular groups and communities, contributing to the marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination of these groups. In India, this is the case for the social structures that support the caste system and that contribute

to discriminate children from lower classes. Worldwide, politically motivated discrimination, stigmatization, and violence against social and religious minorities is a serious threat to stable societies. The stigmatization of children from discriminated and underprivileged social classes is a great risk factor for child development that negatively affects the child's psychology and self-esteem. It is important to note that while experiences of domestic violence during childhood are common in all social and economic classes, it can often be hidden among the wealthy.

Religious traditions recognize the divinity in every child. In many religious stories and passages, children are viewed as a blessing. The birth of a child is seen as a blessing that brings us closer to the experience of God or makes us more aware of the Ultimate Reality. In our religious traditions, children are often described as a whole person, a very important member of our society, and as a gift. Science, at the same time, also shows that young children should be given special attention and care, and need positive and nurturing interactions. In their own ways, both science and our religious traditions point out the importance of early childhood. Yet, in silence, many children suffer different forms of violence inflicted upon them.

¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund, *A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*, UNICEF, New York, 2017, p.7.

¹¹ United Nations Children's Fund, p.7.



against children violates children's physical and emotional well-being. It also violates their spiritual safety and development, as it breaks their connections with others, and their sense of trust and respect for other human beings.

Violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under the age of 18, whether perpetrated by parents or caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers. For younger children, maltreatment, sexual violence, emotional or psychological violence, and bullying are the most common forms of violence. The following table describes the different types of violence, followed by a figure that presents the most recurrent type of violence by age group.

A major obstacle to ending violence against children is the perception of early childhood as being primarily a period of transition and evolving capacities towards adulthood. Only then is a person a fully-fledged person with inherent human rights. This perception must be challenged; the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes all children as rights-holders who must be respected and protected, rather than being treated as passive recipients of services or 'not-yet persons'.¹²

We have a responsibility to preserve the divinity and dignity of our children. In doing so, we must revisit the way violence and authority are used in raising children. Violence

¹² Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, *Violence prevention must start in early childhood*. United Nations, New York, 2018, p. 6.

TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Physical violence

Physical violence includes beating, punching, kicking, caning, hair pulling, ear twisting, and hitting with an object such as a wooden spoon, stick, or belt. These types of physical violence are used as educational tools and means to discipline children, and are practices accepted and justified within the India context.

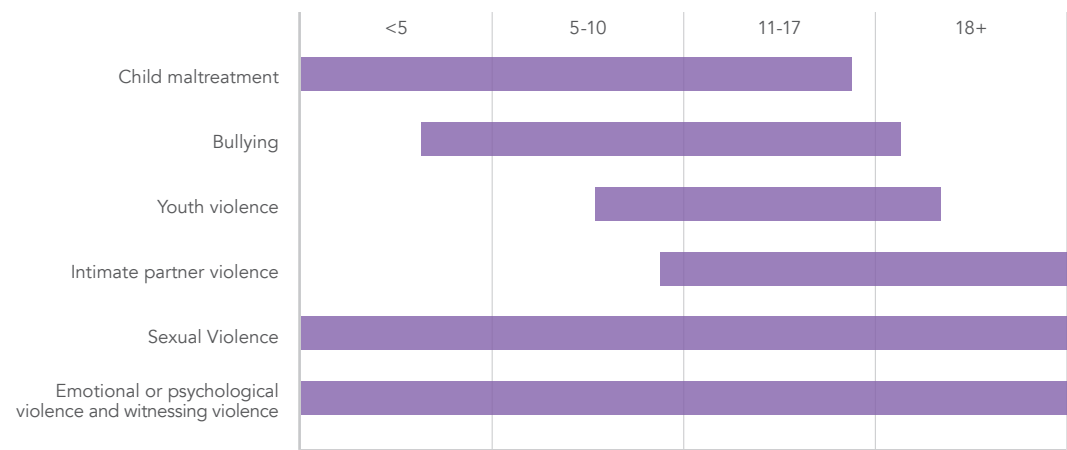
Psychological violence

Emotional or psychological violence and witnessing violence includes restricting a child’s movements, denigration, ridicule, threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection, and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment. Witnessing violence can involve forcing a child to observe an act of violence or the incidental witnessing of violence between two or more other persons.

Sexual violence

Sexual violence includes non-consensual completed or attempted sexual contact; non-consensual acts of a sexual nature not involving contact (such as voyeurism or sexual harassment); acts of sexual trafficking committed against someone who is unable to consent or refuse; and online exploitation.

Figure 1 Type of violence by age group affected¹³



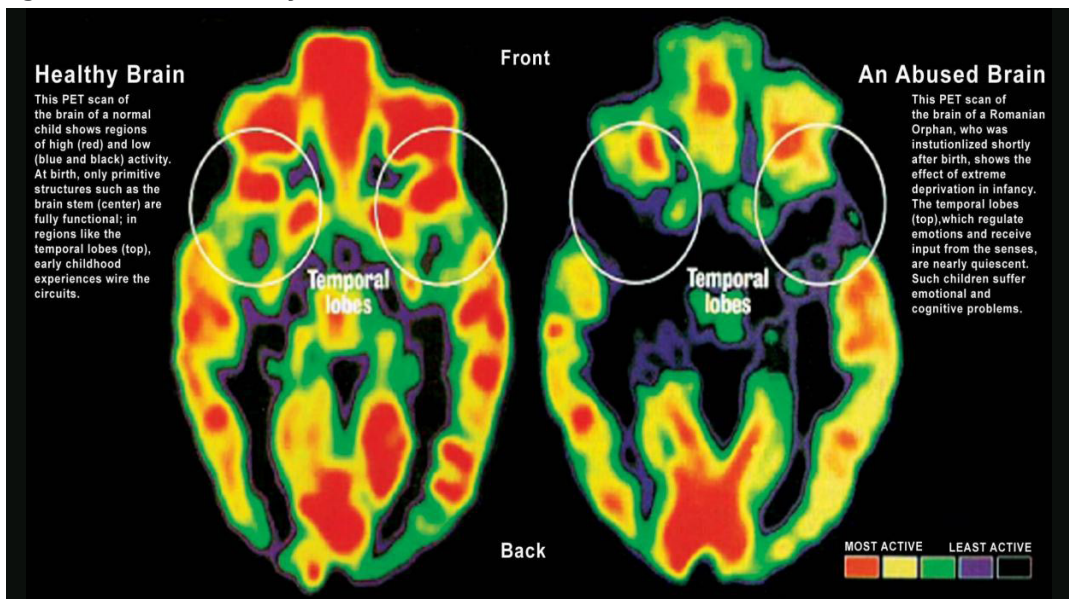
13 World Health Organization, *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*. Executive Summary, 2016, p. 4.

VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD'S BRAIN

Experiencing violence in childhood often has effects throughout an individual's lifetime. Some studies show that children who suffer violence in childhood are more prone to mental illness such as anxiety and depression.¹⁴ The severe effects of the lack of nurturing care are evident in scan images of a brain (Fig. 2). Studies show that a PET scan of a healthy brain generally presents more activities in the front lobe, where emotions are

regulated and circuits are wired, based on the early childhood experiences. When children experience violence and feel fear, their brain recognizes and reacts to it as a threat to their well-being. Another study shows that if children are continuously exposed to violence and fear, their system is kept on high alert. This might result in a rapid escalation of their physical and emotional response in a way that is not in proportion to the situation. The study shows that children who perceive a threat and have over-activated stress responses react by showing aggression towards others to protect themselves, perpetuating the cycle of violence.¹⁵

Figure 2 PET scan of a healthy brain and an abused brain¹⁶



14 E. McCrory et al., 'Heightened neural reactivity to threat in child victims of family violence'. Current Biology Volume 21, Issue 23, Pr947-R948, 06 Dec. 2011.

15 Reuters, 'Study finds how child abuse changes the brain' (5 Dec. 2011). <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brain-violence-mentalhealth/study-finds-how-child-abuse-changes-the-brain-idUSTRE7B41KP20111205>, accessed 11 Jul. 2019.

16 H. Chugani et al, *Local brain functional activity following early deprivation: a study of post institutionalized Romanian orphans*, NeuroImage 14, 2001, p. 1290-1301.

Violence can alter the developing brain’s structure and function: it can affect language acquisition and cognitive functioning, resulting in social and emotional competency deficits and generating fear, anxiety, depression, and the risk of self-harm and aggressive behaviour. Alterations to the brain resulting from childhood violence can also shape later adult behaviour. Longitudinal studies show that children exposed to violence are more likely to be victims of violence later in life and become perpetrators, using violence as adults against domestic partners and their own children; and, be at increased risk of engaging in criminal behaviour.¹⁷

Breaking this vicious cycle for the child, the adult, and for society, requires that every child lives free from all forms of violence from the very start.

A Closer Look at the Evidence

The effects of the lack of appropriate care and early stimulation have been studied by Charles Nelson in his research on the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP). This research looked at institutionalized children in an extreme case of neglect. The research showed that when these children were taken out of institutional care and placed into a family (or ‘placement into high-quality foster care’) before the age of two, children more closely resembled typically developing children. When placement occurred after the age of two, however, then placement into a family did not result in positive outcomes. Early institutional care had caused profound deficits in cognitive and socio-emotional behaviours and an increase in the incidence of psychiatric disorders. However, the early placement of the child into high-quality foster care was able to reverse these negative outcomes.

Source: Nelson, C.A., Zeanah, C.H., Fox, N.A., Marshall, P. J., Smyke, A.T., & Guthrie, D. Cognitive recovery in socially deprived young children: The Bucharest Early Intervention Project. *Science*, 318 (5858), (2007), p. 1937-1940.

My own reflections

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17 Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, p. 4.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD IN INDIA

Violence affecting children in India is a broad and complex phenomenon that can only be described in general terms. It is impossible today to understand the real magnitude of violence affecting children, as national data on the different forms of violence affecting children disaggregated by age group are not available. Not all forms of violence are tracked and, often, violence in the early years goes unreported and undetected.

The types of violence commonly experienced by children from zero to eight years of age are described below.¹⁸

Foeticide, infanticide, and neglect targeting girls

The most extreme form of violence against children in India is constituted by foeticide, infanticide, and neglect targeting girls. Because these crimes are underreported, the magnitude of this type of violence can only be understood by looking at trends in sex ratios at birth that confirm an imbalanced gender ratio. In 1961, for every 1,000 boys under the age of seven, there were 976 girls. The latest 2011 census has found that this figure has dropped to 914 girls for every 1,000 boys. However, there is a significant difference between Northern and Southern India. For example,

the figure drops to 830 girls for every 1,000 boys in the northern state of Haryana and 846 in neighbouring Punjab state. In the national capital territory of Delhi, the figure was 866.¹⁹

The preference for male children is deeply rooted in social and cultural preferences. Despite the criminalization of foeticide, infanticide, and murder targeting girls, these laws have proven difficult to enforce in practice; this is where the contribution of religious leaders is vital to end this form of violence.

Corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is the most commonly experienced form of violence, starting as early as age one. The use of force to discipline children is very common in India; disciplining children is often understood as a very private matter whereby parents and teachers know what is best for the children. Violence becomes normalized as a way to exercise authority over children. While attitudes towards such use of force are changing, there is a need for greater awareness about the consequences of violent discipline.

The normative framework in India addresses the use of corporal punishment in the schools; the 2009 Right of Children to Free and

18 National Commission for the Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR), ChildFund India, *Handbook for Ending Violence Against Children in India*, New Delhi, 2018.

19 Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, *Census of India 2011*.

Compulsory Education Act has made corporal punishment in schools a punishable offence. However, the legislation has not translated into effective management, implementation, monitoring, and reporting. In practice, there is no means to know the extent to which teachers (still) use harsh disciplining methods against children. Additionally, because parents believe that teachers are legitimized to use force in the name of discipline, they often silence their children when they report the use of violence in schools.

Witnessing domestic and intimate partner violence

Children in India often witness domestic and intimate partner violence. Domestic violence usually affects both women and children. Children who live in homes where their mothers are beaten or abused are likely to experience more violence than children who live in homes where this is not the case. When mothers are abused, children may be victimized either through witnessing such violence, being directly abused by the perpetrator of the violence, or indirectly by mothers, because of the stress they experience in their marital relationships. This puts children on a trajectory of being exposed to and experiencing negative effects of such violence across their childhood. This also raises the likelihood that children, once they have grown up and learned these behaviours, will repeat them in their marriages and relationships.

Children's vulnerability to kidnapping and abduction

Cases of child kidnapping and abduction in India are very high; kidnapping of children accounts for nearly sixty per cent or six in every ten cases of kidnapping registered in India. Girls are especially vulnerable to this type of violence. The most vulnerable are girls above the age of 12, who comprise nearly 40 per cent of all kidnapping victims in India. Many of these girls are trafficked for labour or prostitution or are kidnapped for purposes of marriage.

Sexual abuse and exploitation

A widespread form of violence affecting children in India is constituted by sexual abuse and exploitation. The accounts of young girls raped daily are only the tip of the iceberg for this type of violence. As most of the child sexual violence is perpetrated by offenders known to the victim (family members, relatives, neighbours, and persons who—when caught—promise to marry the victim), this type of violence is often unreported. Sexual abuse often starts in the early years of a child.

INSPIREd Faith Communities: Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

HOW CAN WE NURTURE OUR SPIRITUALITY FOR THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE?



Be the change that you wish to see in the world.

– Mahatma Gandhi

In the journey for parenthood that is free of violence and conducive to thriving children, parents need to acknowledge their limitations and find ways to deal with their stress, anger, and frustrations. In today's India, double income families have become the norm, and a new balance between work and care for the family needs to be established. Mothers are extremely under pressure to deliver at work and to care for the family, and this pressure is often transferred to the children. It is important to find new ways to help mothers and fathers share responsibilities.

As parents, caregivers, and all those who are part of the upbringing of the child, we first need to nurture and keep in touch with

our own spirituality and capacity to deal with contradictions in our lives. By nurturing one's spirituality as a parent or caregiver, we are preparing ourselves to provide nurturing care to children, to respond in more positive manners to their needs, and to help create safe and respectful spaces for them to explore their interconnections with others.

From the Hindu perspective, spirituality is a commitment to inner self-growth, leading to a discovery of one's higher dimension and a connection with the world and the Almighty. The purpose of nurturing spirituality is to grow a sense of right values as guiding principles and to avoid misery and sorrow on ourselves, as well as those around us. In Hinduism, divine values such as non-violence, freedom, purity, love, non-covetousness, modesty, selflessness, etc., strengthen harmony and welfare. In contrast, values such as hatred, indifference, greed, anger, violence, arrogance, etc., breed

violence and other evils. Hindu practices aim to strengthen these divine values. Hinduism teaches ahimsa ('non-injury or non-violence'), which is in the mind; sathyam ('truth'), which is the intellect; and brahmacharya ('control'), which controls physical senses. Children are divinely created to be seen as blessings and opportunities for parents to grow, both physically and spiritually. Religious teachings and stories guide us to be peaceful and in harmony in our relationship with other beings, including our children.

Our religious traditions remind us of values and notions that strengthen our understanding of the other. Practising religion and nurturing our own spirituality mean that we are developing relationships, not only with ourselves or vertically with the Transcendent or with God, but also horizontally with peers within and outside of our immediate community. This feeling of interconnectedness enables us to have a sense of belonging; to understand universal values that are common to all religious and humanistic traditions such as respect and empathy; to have a sense of self-control and patience to find peaceful solutions to challenges; and to strengthen a sense of social responsibility that encourages us to address problems that affect others.

Interconnectedness can be expressed through the term 'ubuntu' which means, 'I am because you are.' Ubuntu is an African philosophy that places emphasis on being human through other people. Ubuntu places emphasis on values of human solidarity, empathy, human dignity, and the humaneness in every person.

At the centre of the Ubuntu philosophy are interconnectedness and respect for all people.

These horizontal relationships are also intergenerational. Adults can also learn from these intergenerational interactions. As in Christianity, Jesus said, 'Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'²⁰ This passage reminds us to recognize that children already have a spirituality and that adults can learn from them.

Jesus also taught that the two greatest commandments are, first: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."²¹ Loving oneself is perhaps a prerequisite to love others. With these words, Jesus shows a path towards unity and solidarity with others—solidarity that requires an ethical care for the 'neighbour' as if we were caring for ourselves. The interconnectedness of life, compassion for one another, and solidarity with the stranger are ethical demands in our lives that are transmitted to children not with words but with practical actions and day-to-day positive examples.

The five pillars of Islam are meant to enhance the inner spirituality of its followers, including children, while connecting them with the outer community as well as with God. Creating opportunities to observe, learn, contemplate, practise, and share each pillar of Islam and its meaning, promotes a sense of ethics in our relations with others, vocation, and social

²⁰ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3.

²¹ *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Mark 12:30-31.

responsibility with others and the community. This, in turn, produces a rich spiritual life. This, in turn, produces a rich spiritual life.

The encouragement of spiritual growth is important for all, especially for children and young people, because it is related to a non-material, ethical, and self-awareness aspect in their development. It is also a necessary counterbalance to the attainment-focused demands of educational curricula and society.

Children's spirituality is often hindered by the violence inflicted upon them by adults. In Buddhism, violence is explained through the conditional genesis (or dependent origination) theory, which looks at cause and effect; a chain of causes affects the results. The theory explains the nature of reality in how consciousness developed through our experiences create the mental formations and thoughts that lead to action. It is important to understand that experiences of violence in early childhood—in its many different forms—will have effects in the short term, but also in the long term, on an individual. Violence experienced in early childhood becomes a part of the consciousness and, consequently, shapes how children look at and engage with the world around them. Therefore, by engaging in mindful reflection of those experiences, and of ourselves as part the chain of causes creating violence, we learn to manage violent reactions, and see ourselves and perpetrators of violence as wounded human beings in need of healing.



My own reflections

INSPIRE-ING CHANGE: STRATEGIES FOR ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



Ending violence against children starts with us, in our families, by opening our hearts and minds to be more attentive to the needs of children, and by putting children at the centre of their upbringing. . A nurturing and nourishing environment for children is a violence-free space where children can thrive and reach their full potential.

In India, religion plays a significant role in people's lives. This is true not only because of the high percentage of people practising religion, but also because religious and faith based-institutions provide a large portion of services, including healthcare and education. Religion is tightly connected to the daily lives of people in India and has an important potential to be a catalyst of transformation for the entire society.

No religion condones violence. When violence happens, it must be disconnected from the religious perspective and viewed from a different paradigm. Religious leaders in India can play a key role in strengthening child protection mechanism within their own community and

contributing to raising awareness about the impact of violence against children. In addition, they can lead the path to promote—among parents, caregivers, and teachers—positive, participatory, and non-violent forms of discipline as an alternative to corporal punishment.

The role of religious communities in the prevention of violence against children has been affirmed and endorsed by religious leaders themselves through multiple declarations and in several meetings. The Declaration produced by more than 500 religious leaders and representatives of civil society and faith-based organizations from around the world during the Fifth Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children held in Panama in May 2017, titled *Ending Violence Against Children – Faith Communities in Action*, contains ten commitments to renew the efforts to end all forms of violence that affects children.

The Panama Declaration recalls: “children thrive and grow in trusting relationships with people who love and care for them. Ideally, and for the most part, this happens within

families. Sadly, it also cannot be denied that the home is the place where most abuses occur. Families need support to grow to become peaceful, safe sanctuaries.” It continues by affirming that ‘transformed religious and spiritual communities can offer moral teachings and model practices to prevent, heal, reduce and ultimately end violence against children.’²²

This booklet takes into consideration the importance of multi-stakeholder and multisectoral approaches to end violence against children. To empower families and communities to provide the best care for their children, it proposes three strategic actions that religious communities, families, and civil society organizations can take. These include:

- Challenging norms and values that condone violence.
- Supporting parents and caregivers.
- Enhancing education and life skills that support the creation of safe and inclusive school environments.

These actions are based on a violence prevention and response package called INSPIRE.²³ The INSPIRE strategies include implementation and enforcement of laws; norms and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills.



Implementation and enforcement of laws



Norms and values



Safe environments



Parent and caregiver support



Income and economic strengthening



Response and support services



Education and life skills

Areas covered by the INSPIRE strategies are interconnected and, one way or another, related to all aspects of children’s lives. To successfully eradicate violence against children, multisectoral approaches catalysing change and transformation in all seven areas are needed. While religious communities are often present in all these areas touching children’s lives directly or indirectly, it should be noted that the moral authority and influence of religious leaders and exemplary actions among members of their communities, can be more effective in the three areas noted above.

22 Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), *The Panama Declaration on Ending Violence Against Children*, Panama City, 9-11 May 2017. <https://gnrc.net/en/what-we-do/gnrc-forums/fifth-forum/gnrc-5th-forum-documents>, accessed 9 August 2019.

23 In 2016, ten global agencies launched *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*, an evidence-based resource package of seven strategies to end violence against children.

CHALLENGING NORMS AND VALUES THAT CONDONE VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



Norms guide attitudes and behaviours around child-upbringing, gender roles, and the acceptability of violence within a group or society. Strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive, and gender-equitable relationships for all children is proven effective in ending violence against children.

Some forms of violence, often against women and children, are perceived as 'normal' in society. This social tolerance towards victimization of women, girls, and boys—and often perpetration by men and older boys—stems from social and cultural norms surrounding gender and masculinity, and lower status of children and women.

This is also the case for forms of structural violence such as the exclusion and discrimination caused by the caste system in India that has normalized the social segregation of Dalit children in the country, and that continues to perpetuate inequalities. In this case, society finds it acceptable to have separate seating arrangements for lower class children or for them to be excluded from cultural activities and sports, as their families cannot sustain the expenses for these activities. These forms of exclusion and discrimination are perpetrated in schools and send a message to the children that it is acceptable to discriminate and marginalize other children based on the caste system.

Nurturing positive values such as respect and empathy in early childhood would prevent children from becoming perpetrators of violence against their peers. Nurturing these values during early childhood will break the vicious cycle of violence passed down from one generation to another, where children become perpetrators of violence as adults.

Once, when the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) was kissing one of his grandsons, a man said that he himself does not kiss any of his ten children. The Prophet (PBUH) replied by saying, 'The one with no pity for others is not pitied.'²⁴ This calls for reconsidering the way

of dealing with children based on love and compassion. When a parent kisses his child, demonstrates love, appreciation and mercy for the child, such behaviour strengthens the relationship between the parent and the child, and the trust that children have in adults. A kiss shows that parents are kind and merciful to their children. Love and compassion are powerful elements to nourish the child's spirituality and contribute to the identity formation of the child, to the self-esteem, and sense of security.

Actions to challenge cultural and social norms that condone violence against children:



Advocate to end corporal punishment



Create a safe space for dialogue in your community



Use dialogue and reflection with men and boys



Raise awareness and join advocacy efforts at regional and national levels

24 Al-Bukhari and Muslim



Advocate to end corporal punishment

Corporal punishment is a form of normalized violence used by parents, caregivers, and often by teachers to discipline children. When violence is used in the upbringing of the child, parents and caregivers are sending a message to the child that it is okay to use violence and fear to express frustration, solve challenges, and change behaviours of others.

In the Hindu perspective, corporal punishment is used when parents lack self-discipline and knowledge about what can be done to handle a situation. Hinduism also recognizes that there is a sense of perversion associated with corporal punishment, in a way that there is a need to distort the child from the original form.

What can you do?

- Encourage parents, both mother and father, to create a positive relationship with one another and their children, and use positive encouragement and practices to educate them. Religious leaders can do this, for example, during sermons and other meetings with parents and caregivers, or during pre-marriage counselling sessions.
- Make public statements on national and international days, at civic events, conferences, meetings, and assemblies to de-normalize the use of violence in child upbringing.
- Mobilize your communities to challenge the normalization of violent discipline in all settings by raising awareness on the impact of violence in early childhood.
- Campaign to end corporal punishment and other humiliating practices in schools.
- Create spaces in your communities for children to express their opinion and concerns.





Create safe spaces for dialogue in your community

Within your own religious community, create a safe space for dialogue on the topics of ending violence in early childhood and nurturing spirituality and values. Reflect on how nurturing spirituality and positive values can contribute to building a peaceful and non-violent childhood.

Reflect on the following questions and think of ways to incorporate them into your community's activities and programmes.

- Why does violence occur? How is violence explained in your religious tradition?
- What are the types of violence affecting children in our community?
- What can we do to prevent and end violence against children?

Religious leaders can bring up issues of violence against children in their daily interactions with their communities, including religious activities, meetings, workshops, and sermons.

Once the dialogue and reflection take place within your own community, it may be helpful to have an open dialogue with members of other communities as well.

NOTE: You can use the information about the issue of violence against children provided in this booklet to prompt discussions. In the section 'Bring the dialogue into your community', you can also find a model to bring the dialogue on the issue of violence in early childhood to your communities in practical ways.





Use dialogue and reflection with men and boys

A collective reflection on the narrative of a peaceful and loving childhood that our religious traditions encourage can help challenging normalized violence against children. Through dialogue and reflection, social and cultural norms and behaviours that condone violence in our communities can be transformed. Bringing change to social norms and behaviours is not a sprint but a marathon. In time, more people will embrace beliefs that are favourable to gender equality and attitudes that support non-violent approaches to childcare.

Efforts to promote gender-equitable norms and reduce gender-based violence are enhanced if they include men and boys as well as women and girls, though these efforts can benefit from having same-sex groups to help participants feel comfortable talking and exploring ideas.²⁵

What can you do?

- Invite fathers to a gathering to discuss the importance of early childhood and the impact of violence in children, and the ways they can become more engaged in their children's care and nurturing.
- Organize meetings with boys and men, in an intergenerational format, to discuss the root causes of violence against girls and women; reflect on gender equality; and discuss the normalization of violence.

- Promote examples of fathers' engagement.
- Religious leaders can help challenging gender norms through sermons and during family visits by providing examples and reflections that foster respect for women and girls.



²⁵ World Health Organization, *INSPIRE Handbook: Action for Implementing the Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*, Geneva, 2018.



Get Inspired

DIALOGUE WITH BOYS: SHANTI ASHRAM

In March 2018, against the backdrop of growing violence against girls and women in India, Shanti Ashram took the time to brainstorm with a group of children and adults. The problem was not new, but the solution identified for local action was quite 'creative' and 'focused around young boys' and their understanding of the issue.

Using an approach based on intergenerational dialogue and the active participation of boys, the programme allows for a deep reflection on the root causes of inequality and violence. It aims to mobilize boys to end gender-based violence in their families and within communities.

Shanti Ashram launched this new programme in 2018 on the occasion of International Women's Day. The programme includes a travelling series of dialogues with boys in schools and communities. Over 301 young boys between the ages of 11 and 18 have been part of this dialogue. The principles of dialogue, which include empathy, active listening, respect, and a non-judgmental attitude, provide the framework for this unique series.

The Indian Academy of Paediatrics and faith-based communities provided the intellectual and spiritual resources and experts to support this informed dialogue. A key element is the leadership of young people and children themselves in the facilitation of this dialogue. As a purely voluntary effort in behaviour modification and community progress, schools have shown great interest in hosting these children-led dialogues. From the third series, efforts include documenting the dialogue process and potential impact on boys.

As 15-year-old S. Mohammed, one of the participants, said, 'I have never had the space or time to reflect on this issue. I am glad to do so with other boys from different schools. I don't want to be part of the problem... I want my mother and sister to know this!'

Shanti Ashram has been working in the area of Integrated child development for nearly three decades. Children's active involvement is central to their mission.

Talk and listen to children, allow them to question societal challenges and shape solutions actively for their communities!



Raise awareness and join advocacy efforts at regional and national levels

Often, adults resort to violence because that is the best way they know to raise their children.

For this reason, it is crucial to raise awareness and inform parents and caregivers about the following:

- The importance of the early years in terms of brain and identity formation of the child (refer to p. 8).
- The long-lasting effects of violence in terms of negative health and development outcomes (refer to p. 15)
- The benefits of positive parenting (refer to p. 34).
- The importance of communication and space for dialogue between parents and children.
- The importance of involving fathers more in daily parenting and in dialogue with their children.

Religious leaders are key to raising awareness on these topics through sermons, or pre-marital courses, or campaigns. Religious leaders can be champions of non-violence among their places of worship and contribute to changing attitudes and behaviours that justify violence against children.

A few actions to advocate for include the following:

- Ask your government to invest more in early childhood and produce better data on violence against children.
- Encourage the use of child helplines to report violence and abuse.
- Work with other partners to build coalitions of individuals and organizational supporters. This might include advocating for legislation to protect children from child abuse and neglect, end gender-based violence, child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, or enforce laws that criminalize foeticide, infanticide, and neglect targeting girls, among others.

SUPPORTING PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS



While the entire community should be a part of the dialogue on social and cultural norms, it is equally important to work directly with parents and caregivers to end violent practices and to create positive parent-child relationships. Supporting parents and caregivers to understand the importance of positive, non-violent methods of disciplining children, and effective communication is critical in this effort. This can prevent the risk of child maltreatment

at home, witnessing intimate partner violence, and violent behaviour among children and adolescents.²⁶

In early childhood, children learn not only physical and cognitive skills, but also fundamental social and emotional skills, such as sharing, helping one another, communication, and resolving disagreements without violence. Since children learn these skills and values through observation and

26 World Health Organization, *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*, p. 49.

interaction—including playing—parents and caregivers have a





tremendous influence on children’s learning. Children look to their parents and caregivers as role models and observe how adults around them interact with one another. Through modelling and observation, they learn not only the hallmark of positive relationships but also negative prejudices and discriminatory norms. This is why parents and caregivers must also focus on nurturing their own spirituality and values so that we are positive role models and provide children with a safe and emotionally secured environment.

The holistic well-being and happiness of our children cannot wait. Therefore, as parents, caregivers, and religious leaders, we have to find ways to raise children that place them at

the centre and protect them from violence. This means that parents need to undergo a process of unlearning their current habits, also in terms of re-thinking the happiness of the child, not only in terms of academic achievements and, later, career goals in life, but especially in terms of values, love and compassion, and the happiness of the child.

By focusing on the spiritual development of the child, parents can discover best ways to improve their parenting styles, respond to the needs of children, and help empower them as active agents.

Actions to support parents and caregivers:

 <p>Encourage positive parenting</p>	 <p>Stress the importance of role modelling</p>
 <p>Foster communication and dialogue with children</p>	 <p>Strengthen the agency of the child</p>



Encourage positive parenting

When parents bring up their children, they themselves are brought up.

– Chief Acharya Swami Sadatmananda Saraswathi²⁷

Violence-free parenting requires us to put ourselves in the shoes of children so that we can better understand the reasons for their behaviours, frustrations, and difficulties. It is also essential to guide our children in expressing their feelings and emotions with words and to have a dialogue, rather than turning to corporal or verbal abuse of the child.

In the Christian tradition adults are encouraged to be like children, as illustrated in the passage where Jesus said, 'Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'²⁸

The Hindu perspective on good parenting underlines that parents have to be living examples of the Divine, since children pick up values and knowledge by imitating their elders. These will help create a space for mutual attention by both parents and the children based on love and devotion, leaving no room for violent means to discipline children. From the Hindu perspective, negative

values such as selfishness, individualism, and arrogance pose challenges to good parenting.

Our religious traditions emphasize the importance of family. In Islam, family is recognized as a fundamental platform that supports growth and development of the child in every aspect. The mosques and religious leaders play a role as a hub for those families to gather around and to support each other. Wisdom parenting according to Islam,²⁹ advises parents to care for their children based on four principles: counselling, values of parents, the importance of living with consciousness, the mission to uphold justice, and adherence to etiquettes.

These reflections invite parents to unlearn some of the child upbringing practices that violate children's physical and emotional well-being in favour of parenting that is violence-free, more positive, and empowering. Religious leaders can support families in their journey of parenthood, and provide practical suggestions and training to parents and caregivers to nurture values and spirituality and to make homes free of violence and fear.

How can this be done?

- Talk and listen to children, allow them to ask questions freely and create time to talk about their day.
- Remind each child about their uniqueness and the positive things they do, and encourage children's natural inclination

²⁷ Speaking about positive parenting and nurturing spirituality. Report of the India round table discussion on Nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence held on 11 and 12 April 2019.

²⁸ *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3–4.

²⁹ Qur'an Surah Luqman.

towards goodness and altruism with examples of openness and dialogue.

- Refrain from pushing children to compete with each other.
- Encourage children to explore and dream, to envision their ideas, and imagine new ways of doing things.
- Spend quality time with your children; take time to play, listen, share stories; and attend to their needs.
- Use a restorative approach to discipline; instead of punishing children, using fear or physical violence, discuss with them why they acted in the way they did, the consequences on themselves and others, and what they can do to make things right.
- Use respect and empathy when correcting children; pause before raising your voice and try to understand that the child might be tired, overwhelmed, or is in need of attention.
- Teach children to concentrate as this ability enables the child to practise higher ideals.



Keep in Mind

WHAT IS POSITIVE PARENTING?

Positive parenting focuses on creating safe home environments and building a foundation of support and care for children through affection, quality time, praise, and healthy methods of dealing with difficult behaviour, such as positive discipline that teaches prosocial behaviour.

Nurturing parenting involves helping children develop healthy social and emotional behaviours, teaching life skills, and promoting well-being through modelling healthy ways to solve problems and communicate feelings.

Positive discipline refers to praising, rewarding, supporting good behaviour, and non-violent responses to misbehaviour that take children's cognitive and emotional stage into account, such as natural or logical consequences, time-out or taking breaks, and redirection.

Source: World Health Organization, *INSPIRE Handbook: action for implementing the seven strategies for ending violence against children*, Geneva, 2018.



Get Inspired

WORKING WITH PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FOR THE HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD: WORLD VISION INDIA

World Vision India has a robust and comprehensive list of interventions in the area of early childhood development including working to prevent malnutrition and disease, strengthening education opportunities for the most vulnerable, and working with parents and caregivers to improve child protection. Under each of these areas, multiple interventions are implemented including health support during pregnancy and the first 1,000 days of the child, nutrition programmes that promote home-based gardening and farming, training for childcare workers and mothers, and positive parenting training.

To implement these programmes, World Vision works closely with the communities, training volunteers in each community who then become agents of change and transformation. Young mothers from the community are trained to raise awareness about the importance of nutrition during pregnancy, health check-ups, the spacing of pregnancies, and necessary vaccinations. The volunteers also provide counselling and support after childbirth during the first 1,000 days of the child.

The programme has empowered parents and caregivers to prevent malnutrition and diseases and has raised awareness about positive parenting and the holistic development of the child. World Vision India's holistic child development approaches include value formation as a means to spiritual nurture for positive human relationships with one another. Values of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are expressions of one's spirituality that aid growth and development in a positive way. These values are included in the trainings for parents and caregivers.



Stress the importance of role modelling

The more positive examples you give to the child, the lesser possibility of the child indulging in any kind of violence.

– Dr Priya M. Vaidhya³⁰

Children—as well as parents and caregivers—who use violence, often learn it from their families and from being victims or witnesses of violence. This increases the possibility that they will use violence against others. When the surrounding environment is dominated by violence, violence and aggressiveness become the only ways known to relate to others.

In early childhood, children learn not only physical and cognitive skills, but also fundamental social and emotional skills, such as sharing, helping one another, communication, and resolving disagreements without violence. Since children learn these skills and values through observation and interaction—including playing—parents and caregivers have a tremendous influence on children's learning. Children look to their parents and caregivers as role models and observe how adults around them interact with one another. Through modelling and observation, they learn not only the hallmark

of positive relationships but also negative prejudices and discriminatory norms

The Lord Buddha led by example by showing loving kindness towards children through interactions with his son Rahula and others. Similarly, in all religions, adults are called to lead by example by demonstrating positive behaviour and upholding the principles of their religion in their daily lives.

What can be done?

- Parents and caregivers need to practise the values they want to transmit to their children, showing 'the value of the values' to children, as opposed to trying to impose values as commandments.
- Respect the views of children, their ideas, and interests.
- Engage children in service activities so they can learn responsibility, compassion, and solidarity.
- Treat all members of your family (wife, husband, children, parents, siblings, and others) with empathy and respect, and solve disagreements in non-violent ways based on dialogue.
- Select and apply cultural and social rules that have a positive influence and contribute to the child's overall well-being.
- Model respect of people of different religions and backgrounds by allowing children to mingle with those who do not practise their same religion.

³⁰ Speaking about Hindu philosophy in reference to the Puruṣārthas or Inherent values of the Universe: Artha (economic values), Kama (pleasure), Dharma (righteousness), and Moksha (liberation). Report of the India round table discussion on Nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence held on 11 and 12 April 2019.



Foster communication and dialogue with children

Parents often recur to violence, without even listening to the child or letting the child explain why a certain behaviour took place. Instead, parents should make the time to communicate with their children, learn from them, and be closer to them. This allows parents to better understand the needs and aspirations of their children. Indeed, only when children are at the centre of parenting can we truly understand their needs and positively respond.

What can be done?

- Learn how to communicate and explain to children, refraining from telling children what to do without explaining why.
- Speak the language of the child.
- Use joy in the interaction with children; it is fundamental to transmit positive values to them and to make them feel safe and appreciated.
- Do not address children in negative ways, for example, by insulting them.
- When you want to reprimand children for wrong behaviour, do not insult the child but, rather, focus on the 'bad behaviour'.
- Refrain from using comments such as 'a man doesn't cry'; these expressions reinforce negative masculinity and prevent children from feeling and expressing their emotions.
- Be patient as children might not be ready to have a dialogue or to communicate about what is disturbing them. Wait for the right time!





Strengthen the agency of the child

Mary asked her son why he left her and returned to the temple when he was 12. He replied: 'Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?'

– Luke 2:39-52

The topic of the agency of the child—how much space we give our children to grow, develop, and follow their aspirations from a young age—must be a central aspect of parenting. The above quote from the Bible shows a worried Mary. At the same time, the story shows a Mother that respects the choices of her child as she wisely and knowledgeably gave her child freedom. This exemplifies that it is important to give space to our children to express their views and be heard; and we need to listen to them and allow them to participate in making decisions that affect them, even during early years.

Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire understanding of the people, places, and routines in their lives, along with awareness of their own unique identity. They make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas, and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language.³¹

The Qur'an teaches us to maintain two fundamental principles with regard to children: one must always approach children with the utmost respect and dignity, and one should deal with children with utmost love and care. These principles underline that children are subjects, not objects to impose our views. Discipline should always be carried out through the form of counselling, an encounter mediated through mutual love, respect, and trust, rather than a harsh, unloving, disrespectful encounter.

In Buddhism, children are viewed as a whole person and not an extension of parents. Their individuality is respected; this means that parents need to listen to them, respect their choices, and provide guidance. In one sense, our children do 'belong' to us. We bring them into the world; they are in our care. Yet we do not own them. They are individuals in their own right, ready to blossom into what they will become. As Khalil Gibran expressed in *The Prophet*:

31 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), General Comment No 7: *Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood*. Rev.1, 20 Sept. 2006. https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/general_comments/GC7.Rev.1_en.doc.html, accessed 11 Jul. 2019.

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said,

Speak to us of children. Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you, And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,

which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them,

but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,

and He bends you with His might

that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies,

so He loves also the bow that is stable.³²



Keep in Mind

DIALOGUE WITH CHILDREN

Ending violence starts by empowering children to think and speak for themselves.

Empower children to ask questions and express themselves by creating a safe space for them to do so. Review the contents of children's programmes and classes in your community. Encourage parents to do the same at home. Strengthen the notion of religious institutions as a safe place for children and families.

It is crucial to listen to and value what children are saying to us. In early childhood, it is important for children to feel that they are being heard, and to receive acknowledgements and responses to the many questions they ask, as a part of their process to discover the world.

Children's participation in the activities at home and communities need to be encouraged and genuinely supported. Children need to be provided with space and opportunity for 'service' and care for the other, starting from early childhood years.

32 Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*. Arrow Books Ltd. New York, 1991.

ENHANCING EDUCATION AND LIFE SKILLS THAT SUPPORT THE CREATION OF SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS



Schools have an important role to play in the life of every child. In many places, children from their early years have daily interactions with teachers and school staff. Schools and day care centres become a central part of the child's experiences contributing to their holistic development and character formation.

Schools and day care centres can be a positive force for change and transformation of our societies. But, they are also places where violence and inequalities can be reproduced, as schools can also be the mirrors of the injustices in our societies.

Education and life skills refer to deliberate efforts to create safe and supportive school environments, where positive values are nurtured, children feel protected, respected, and appreciated, so they are able to build positive relationships with teachers and their peers. Building positive relationships between teachers and learners is the cornerstone of building a positive school environment and a culture of peace. Schools should be places to learn to embrace differences, respect one another, strengthen children's identities, and learn to live together with others. It is in the

early years that children start creating the foundations of the ethical values that will guide them later in life.

Education and life skills also refer to building socio-emotional learning skills that are fundamental to foster resilience in children. Socio-emotional skills are a set of skills that include managing emotions and anger, building positive and respectful relationships, and solving problems using non-violent means.

The active participation of children in the learning process through play, singing, the use of the Arts, praying, and introspection

in the early years is a central element for a learning environment that is conducive to nurturing values and spirituality. The idea is that teachers are not instructing but rather guiding and structuring the learning process by organizing learning activities and helping everyone grow together.

As religious leaders and communities in India are engaged in providing education and day care services, they can be the drivers of change and be a catalyst of transformation, engaging with the teachers and the school administration.

Suggested actions for teachers to make schools safe and inclusive:





Make schools safe places for children

To make schools flourishing environments for all children, as well as safe places for them to be and develop, teachers need to have a good understanding of child development, including a deep knowledge of the impact of violence in early childhood. Research shows that corporal punishment in schools is particularly practised in the first years of primary schooling.

Efforts to raise awareness in teachers and administrators are necessary to ensure that schools are safe, engaging, and positive environments contributing to the development of thriving children.

What can be done?

- Develop a Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy, outlining the rights of children according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Make teachers and staff sign it.
- Train all teachers and personnel on the impact of violence in the early years, alternative forms of discipline, and examples of how to use them.
- Organize round table discussions or fora in schools about the Convention on the Rights of the Child involving all school staff, parents, and caregivers.
- Teach emotional intelligence in schools in order to learn to label feelings and manage them.
- Help children learn about 'good touch' and 'bad touch', so they are equipped to identify physical and sexual abuse.
- Have zero tolerance to bullying and violence among peers.
- Create mechanisms for reporting abuse and safe spaces for children to talk about situations of violence.





Make schools nurturing environments for children

Schools need to become nurturing environments for children helping children to grow, develop, and thrive.

Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of every child to holistic development including 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.'

How can teachers be supported to create nurturing environments in schools that contribute to the holistic development of the child?

- Empower teachers with knowledge, skills, and confidence to use positive discipline techniques to manage classroom behaviour. A nurturing environment is an environment free of violence and fear. Positive discipline includes setting clear expectations of behaviours in the classroom while praising and encouraging learners. Further, misbehaviour is dealt with through non-violent strategies that allow children to understand and learn from their mistakes.³³
- Train teachers to monitor and manage their own feelings, anger and frustration, controlling impulses, and developing positive relations with children that are respectful and mindful of children's needs. These improved relationships should not only prevent violence, but
- also improve children's learning, health and well-being.
- Create opportunities for teachers to reflect and examine their assumptions, bias, and beliefs about violence and violent discipline inflicted on children. This also includes guiding teachers to reflect on their own attitudes towards violence, gender, power and authority dynamics, and diversity in the classroom and in the school. These safe spaces can allow teachers moments for dialogue and discovery of alternative ways to foster and enhance learners' engagement and academic achievements.
- Equip teachers to nurture spirituality in children using methods that include observing children to understand their natural capacities and inclinations, allowing the child to have opportunities to connect with the self, the others, the surrounding environment, and God or the Ultimate Reality.

³³ World Health Organization, *School-based violence prevention: a practical handbook*, Geneva, 2019.



Get Inspired

EMPOWERING MADRASSA TEACHERS: THE TARRAQI I FOUNDATION

The vision of Tarraqi 'I' Foundation is the progress of humanity through education, skills development, and ethical economic development. The Foundation is committed to including and empowering marginalized populations helping them to find their inherent strengths and facilitate an enabling environment. The Tarraqi Foundation works with madrasa schools in Northern India to improve education opportunities for children of vulnerable groups.

The Tarraqi school development programme focuses on empowering madrasa teachers who work with young children. This is done through an innovative pedagogy that is child-centred and highly participatory to enhance learning experiences for young children. The curriculum includes the values of Islam and integrates aspects of socio-emotional learning and the spiritual development of the child. The training equips madrasa teachers with life-skills and strengthens their communication skills. Teachers also learn new and innovative ways to enhance learning in the classroom.

The programme has proved effective in increasing engagement and participation of young children in the learning process. Teachers also feel more motivated and better equipped to cope with the learning needs of young children; they feel confident to use an innovative pedagogy as they see improved achievement in the children.



Be a role model

We all learn best by example; values cannot be taught but they need to be modelled. Teachers, educators, and caregivers in day cares and schools are key actors in children's early years in terms of fostering positive attitudes and nurturing ethical values.

In the early years, simple gestures such as having a loving and caring tone of voice, or welcoming every child by their name in the mornings, are powerful ways to boost children's self-esteem and their self-confidence.

A few tips for teachers include:

1. Demonstrate positive attitudes, behaviours, and actions.
2. Show mutual understanding, respect, and appreciation for people of different backgrounds.
3. Welcome diversity.
4. Demonstrate consistency between words, behaviours, and actions. Children imitate what they see!
5. Be reflective and conscious of the impact that, as a teacher, your behaviour and attitudes have on the character formation and sense of identity of children from the ages of zero to eight.



Keep in Mind

We need to model failures and vulnerabilities as much as we model success, since these are important parts of the human condition. Teachers can show young children that making mistakes is a normal part of learning. It is an achievement to learn from our mistakes!





Get Inspired

NURTURING SPIRITUALITY IN THE EARLY YEARS: AN INSPIRATION FROM THE MONTESSORI PEDAGOGY

Maria Montessori is recognized worldwide as one of the most innovative educationalist of the 20th century. Her pedagogical methods are child-centred and focus on enhancing the natural talents of children. Questions and interests of the children themselves guide the learning and the curricula, rather than what adults think children should learn.

To better understand children, teachers are required to observe children and their natural inclination to learn and connect with others, the environment around them, and with God or the Ultimate Reality. When teachers understand children better, they realize their natural inclination for learning and for peacefulness. In order to facilitate this process of unfurling of the child's natural tendencies and capacities, teacher training courses focus on the preparation of the self (the adult) and of the environment. The preparation of the self is a process that is initiated during the training, but continues right through the adult's life and grows with their experience and knowledge of the children. The preparation of the environment happens in many different ways. Maria Montessori observed that young children have 'absorbent minds'; this means that they learn language, culture, and even religious beliefs largely through the process of osmosis or 'absorbing' what is around them rather than through lessons and lectures. Therefore, the environment around the children plays a significant role in the nurturing and development of the child. The adult is always mindful of ensuring that children also find opportunities to engage with the environment around them according to their age, needs, and capacities.

When children truly engage and interact with each other and the teachers, they experience a connection with their work, their peers, teachers, and become more aware of God or the Ultimate Reality. These connections are deeply personal; the teacher becomes a facilitator encouraging the child in these discoveries. The resulting concentration leads to a calmness of nature, which is a revelation in itself. In this regard, religion and religious life are part and parcel of many Montessori schools, particularly in India.

For the very young child, their interest lies in the practical and ritualistic aspects of religious practice, which include singing a prayer song from different religions, setting up the altar for prayer, preparing the manger before Christmas, making patterns with rice flour at the altar. These are only a few examples of how children engage with and understand religion through the practice of daily life. The stories related to festivals and celebrations are shared with great enthusiasm. As they grow older, children find joy in getting to know more about these many religions that they have grown up with. So, what starts as a hands-on exercise for the child under six, becomes a foundation for the intellectual exploration to understand religions better for the older elementary-age child.



Use alternative and positive discipline

Schools need to provide a safe environment where peace and non-violence are at the basis of all interactions. Schools need to be a safe place to learn and strengthen children's identities, foster inclusion and representation, and to embrace pluralism, appreciating similarities and differences across ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultures.

Oftentimes violent practices such as corporal punishment, bullying, and other violent behaviours are condoned in schools.

The best alternative to violent discipline is to create a respectful environment and relationship between teachers and children, where children can express their views, ask questions, feel heard and recognized, and where negative behaviours are not punished but discussed and dealt through a restorative approach that affirms children's dignity and helps them learn to manage their emotions.

A few tips for teachers include:

- Use dialogue as an alternative to harsh physical punishment. This helps children understand what they did, why, and the impact on themselves and others.
- Ask children to create their own ground rules to deal with problems based on respect and empathy for one another.
- Examine your own assumption as a teacher and your own experiences with violence.
- Recognize and address bullying and discrimination by having a dialogue with children and helping them identify when it happens.
- Respond effectively to incidents of violence and ask children to reflect on alternative ways to solve problems without resorting to violence.





Introduce interfaith learning

Religious pluralism is here not because of me or you, but because it is the will and design of God.

– Dr Priya M. Vaidhya³⁴

A great deal of violence is taught in community schools, including the supremacy of one's own religion, and therefore of one's ethnicity, and the insignificance of others. Mutual understanding and respect can only be nurtured when diverse religious communities work together to build a more inclusive narrative that understands interdependency and embraces one another.

The curriculum at religious schools can be revised to strengthen norms and values that affirm the interconnectedness of people and foster interfaith learning. The notion that 'others are as valuable as I am' needs to be strengthened. This would mean that different religious traditions and those who follow them are acknowledged and respected in the content of what children learn, but also in practical ways in the school settings. Through learning about other traditions, children discover that there are universal values and notions such as non-violence, meditation and prayer, fasting, as well as the concept of loving our neighbours, among others, and that those are shared in all of our religions.

Some tips for teachers include:

- Encourage the interaction with people of other religions. This is also present in the Hindu scriptures that invite children to play with different people and to practise togetherness.
- Organize interfaith visits allowing children to learn about other places of worship, rituals, and religious practices. After the visit, encourage children to reflect on what they saw, heard, touched, smelled, and did. This early experience of visiting the sacred place of the other can have a lifelong mark in children's ability to embrace differences.
- Organize festivals that celebrate all religions and allow children to be exposed and participate.
- Use singing to learn songs from other religious traditions and understand what their lyrics are about.
- Use games and play that teach children unity, gratitude, and love.
- Allow coming together to pray from different religious perspectives, as this demonstrates respect for one another, enhances children's own religious identity, and acknowledgement of the other.
- Involve parents in interfaith visits or invite them to dialogues with representatives from other religions.
- Use stories from religious scriptures to nurture ethical values.

³⁴ Speaking about interfaith learning and pluralism. Report of the India round table discussion on Nurturing values and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence held on 11 and 12 April 2019.



Get Inspired

BRINGING INTERFAITH TO THE EARLY YEARS: THE BALA SHANTI SCHOOLS

Working at the intersection between childhood development and poverty alleviation, Shanti Ashram's Bala Shanti programme seeks to provide children from impoverished backgrounds the opportunity to enhance their learning capacities and break the vicious cycle of poverty, advancing peace and inter-religious cooperation among diverse groups in India.

The two-year Bala Shanti programme integrates play-way learning, the Montessori method, and hands-on experience to make learning fun. The curriculum incorporates Gandhian principles and begins with an interfaith prayer each day. By actively celebrating a variety of religious festivals and incorporating relevant stories and folklore into the curriculum, the Bala Shanti programme integrates the core of interfaith learning into the everyday schedule of the children.

Rooted in the philosophy of Maria Montessori, the Bala Shanti programme sees every child as a 'spiritual embryo,' with the first few years of the child's life being key to the process of socio-emotional and spiritual development. The values of respect, cooperation, and spirituality are fully integrated into the programme. The Bala Shanti programme ensures that children grow and thrive on a strong foundation of positivity and acceptance. Also, in response to the need for nutritional food, the Bala Shanti programme also provides 400 grams of protein-rich snacks for the students every week. This is an intervention launched to reverse malnutrition among these children. Further, through parenting networks and workshops, caregivers are included as integral stakeholders in the programme, through moments of dialogue, sharing, and celebrations.

Nurturing ethical values and spirituality in schools: the role of school curricula

School curricula nowadays put a strong emphasis on the cognitive development of the child and much less emphasis on core human values (kindness, empathy, respect, generosity, courage, perseverance, fairness, cooperation, open-mindedness, sense of belonging) which are critical to the quality of all our relationships.

From the early years, children are taught to read and write. The socio-emotional and spiritual development of the child, however, is often not adequately articulated and supported in the curricula for the early years.

It is of crucial importance that curricula for the early years re-focus on the human dimension, the nurturing of values, and on the development of life and social skills. Life skills refer to the ability of dealing effectively with the challenges of everyday life. These include cognitive and emotional skills such as self-control, critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal and social skills. Social skills can be described as the way we interact and build relationships with others. Effective programmes that develop these skills lead to prosocial behaviours, including finding violent-free ways to solve conflicts and displaying empathy towards others.



Get Inspired

SRI AUROBINDO RURAL AND VILLAGE ACTION AND MOVEMENT (SARVAM) FOR THE HOLISTIC GROWTH OF CHILDREN

Education is one of the fundamental areas where the SARVAM Integral Village Development Programme deploys its energies and resources. The Programme aims to take holistic education to the villages, focusing on the fundamental and integrated development of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of the human self, by adapting its delivery to rural conditions and status.

SARVAM has developed a curriculum based on simple, engaging, and interactive methods of teaching, relevant to the rural surroundings and experiences. The curriculum focuses on cognitive development and socio-emotional learning. A central part of the curriculum is the focus on character and personality building in the process of imparting curricular and physical education to rural children. The aim is also to ignite the aspiration for self-development and self-reliance in them.

As a result of the persistent efforts of SARVAM, currently all the children covered by the programme in the age group of two to five years attend preschool and experience this holistic curriculum for child development.



BRING THE DIALOGUE INTO YOUR COMMUNITY

Within your own religious community or in collaboration with other communities, plan a programme for reflection and dialogue on this topic. It is important that the dialogue takes place in a safe environment where everyone's views are respected, and they feel safe to be, speak, and share. This does not mean that everyone has to agree with one another.

Dialogue is a beginning of a process to build trust and for everyone to listen and to be heard without prejudices. To do so, a space where everyone can actively be involved in the experience must be provided. If helpful, invite experts from the local Child Protection Authority, paediatricians, and other child-focused organizations as resource persons to share information about scientific evidence and other facts about violence against children. After the dialogue, build a concrete plan of action.

Ground rules for dialogue³⁵

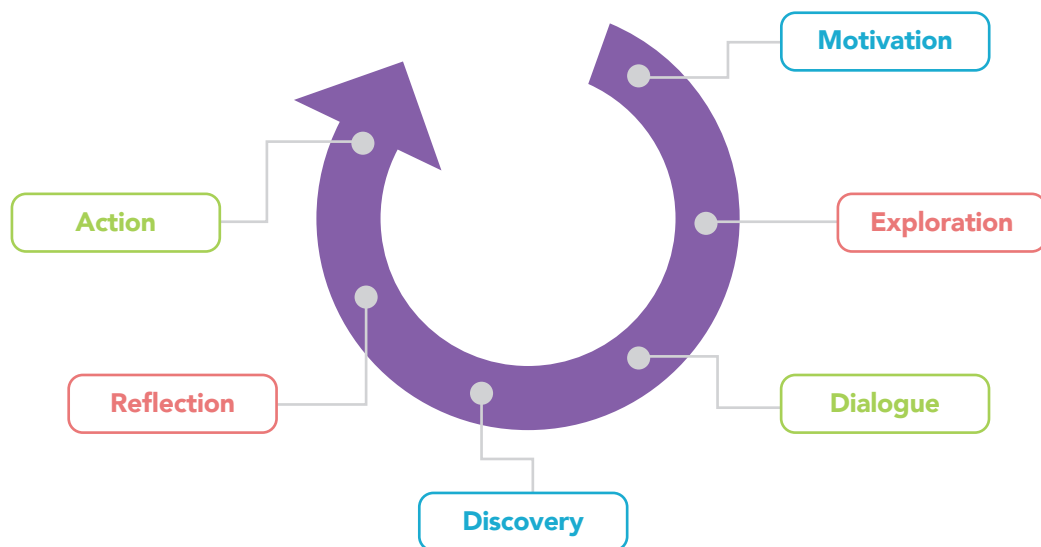
Share these points with the participants before the dialogue, so it is a safe and respectful place for all who take part:

- Respect differences in experience and perspective.
- Speak as an individual, not as a representative of a group or organization.
- Speak truthfully and from your own experience.
- Do not try to persuade or change others.
- Listen openly, respectfully, and without interruption.
- Allow time for those who are quieter.
- Honour confidentiality.
- Avoid using negative stereotypes or generalizations.
- Be willing to learn and be changed by the experience.

³⁵ Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, A Trainer's Guide to Inter-faith Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka (2013). http://www.karunacenter.org/uploads/9/1/6/8/0/9680374/_karunacenter_inter-faith-tot-guide-2013.pdf, accessed 11 Jul. 2019.

PLANNING THE PROGRAMME

The following process is suggested to ensure that the dialogue leads to deeper reflection and continued learning.³⁶



Motivation:

Start the meeting with a meditation or silent prayer. Use songs, poems, religious scriptures, videos, or the arts to activate participants' interest, perception, and motivation to further explore the topic. For example, listen to childhood songs everyone knows and reflect on the lyrics; think about the happy childhood memories that the song brings back and share a reflection; or ask participants to share a photo of a memory of their childhood or of their children, or reflect on a story from a religious scripture on the view of children and the sacredness of their lives.

Exploration:

Invite participants to explore ideas and gain new experience. Create an atmosphere where they can share their thoughts and feelings. You can invite a speaker to present the evidence on violence against children and the impact on brain development, the identity formation of the child, and their lives. Allow time for questions and answers and for personal reflections. You can also use case studies related to violence against children and explore the root causes, consequences, and individual and collective responsibilities. You may use religious scriptures as well to challenge violence against children and provide an alternative view of how to respond.

³⁶ Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, Global Network of Religions for Children and Arigatou Foundation, *Learning to Live Together: An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education*, Geneva, 2008.

Dialogue:

It is an opportunity to exchange ideas, share experiences, and discover the other and to challenge one's own perceptions and prejudices. For example, organize participants in groups of no more than five to eight people. Using the suggested questions below, discuss among the groups. Assign a facilitator and a note taker for each group. Refer to the section 'Ground rules for dialogue' on page 53. Use sufficient time for dialogue. The suggestion is to take about 30 to 40 minutes or more.

Discovery:

Through the process of dialogue, participants will discover new understandings and ideas. This may not come immediately or all at once. It might even come days or weeks later. For now, an adequate space is needed for sharing the ideas gathered during the group discussion. For example, reconvene the plenary and invite each group to share the main result of their discussion.

Reflection:

Invite participants to reflect on the experience and dialogue, and internalize the learning. You can give space to write down thoughts or share their main reflections with peers.

Action:

Before the meeting ends, summarise the main conclusions and suggested actions, and identify follow-up steps. Ask participants to make a commitment to improve their parenting practices and carry out the plan you made during the dialogue programme. End the meeting with a meditation or silent prayer for children.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Question 1

In your opinion, what are some of the challenges and supporting factors in nurturing values and spirituality during early childhood in the homes and schools? Please list any examples from your community.

Question 2

What can religious communities do to support families, parents, caregivers, and teachers so that young children can grow in safe, caring, and loving environments, free of violence? Please list examples from your community.

Question 3

What social norms and beliefs that condone violence against children in early years do you think need to be challenged? And how? Please list any examples from your community.

Question 4

What can faith-based organizations, civil society organizations, and schools do to challenge violence against children in early years? How can they collaborate with religious communities? Please list any examples from your community.

Question 5

What recommendations do you have to continue this dialogue and prioritize the role of religious communities in creating loving, respectful, and empowering environments for children?



FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT US

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