

# INSPIREd Faith Communities:

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

LEBANON



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**

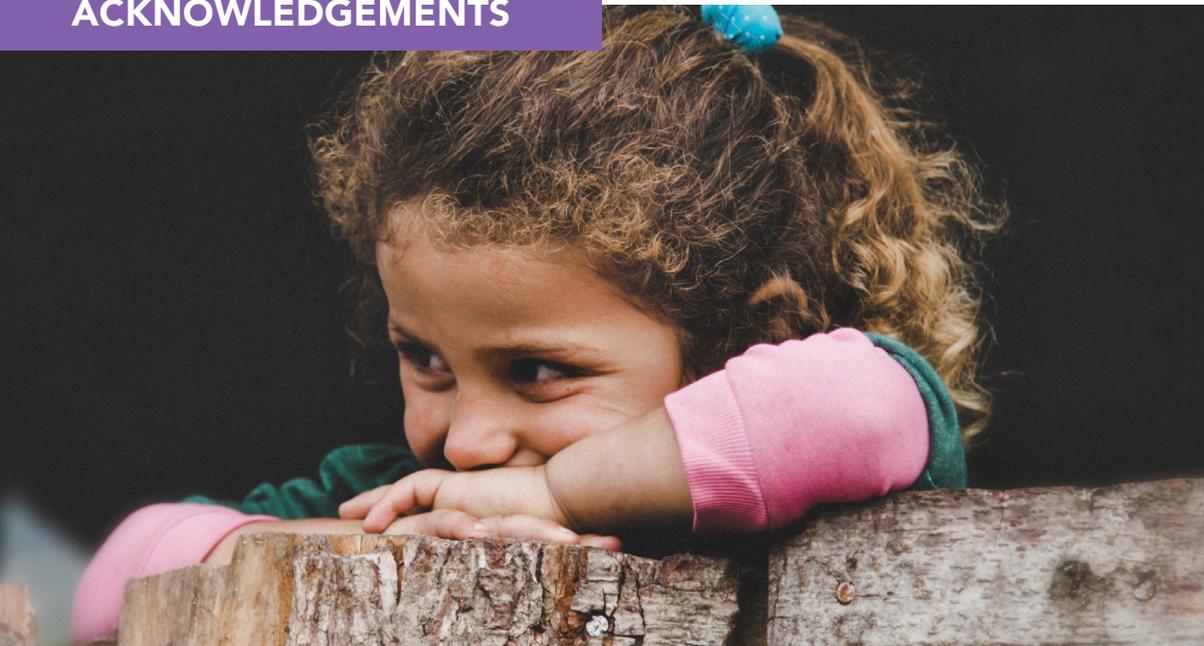
INSPIRE is an evidence-based technical package to support countries in their efforts to prevent and respond to violence against children. It identifies a select group of strategies that have shown success in reducing violence against children. These strategies include implementation and enforcement of 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/](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 discussions<sup>1</sup> 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 Beirut, Lebanon on 2 May 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 Lebanon. It aspires to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood, learn 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.



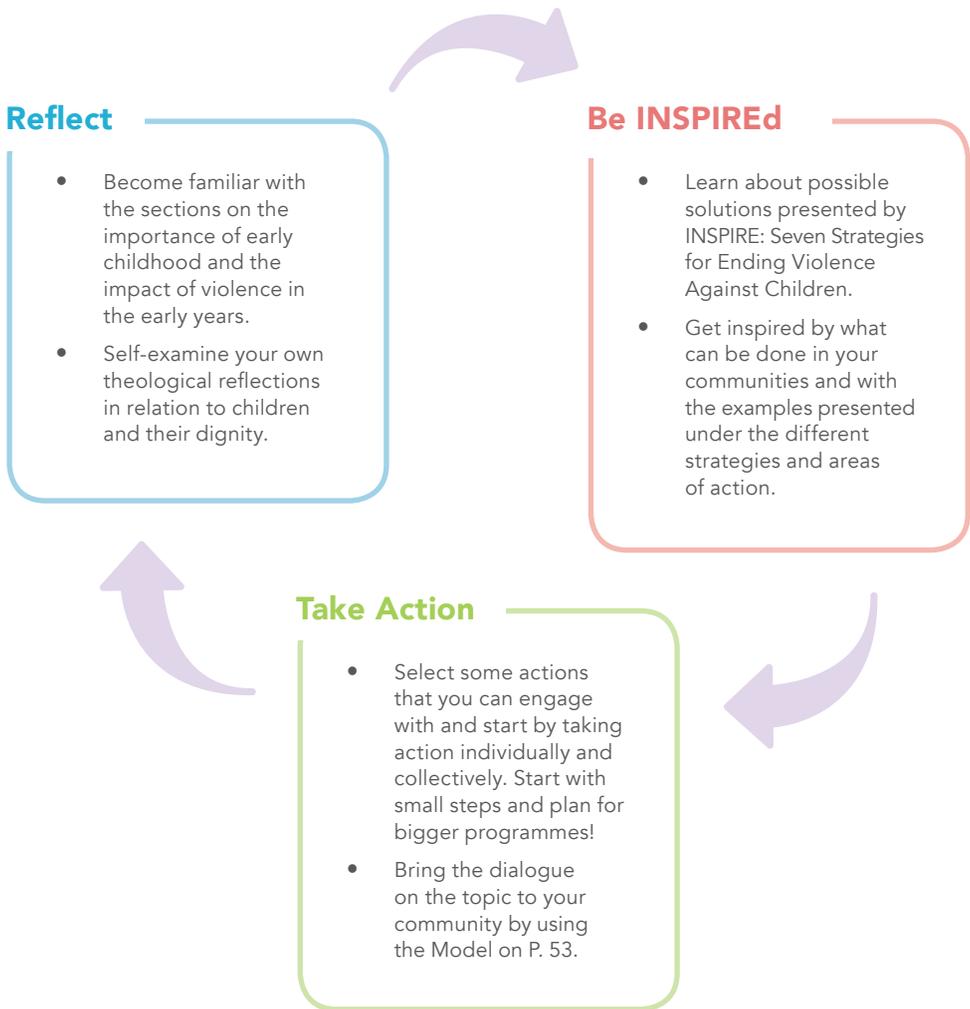
Influence the transformation of attitudes and behaviours around child upbringing that affect the dignity of the child.



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. 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)<sup>2</sup>, an adornment of life (Zeenah)<sup>3</sup>, a great blessing (Ni'imah)<sup>4</sup>, and is regarded as a protector or friend who carries legacy (Waleeh).<sup>5</sup> Through these powerful words, the Qur'an reminds us 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 the Islamic tradition, the early years are

viewed as central for the character formation of the child. For that reason, in Islam, the period from conception to the first eight years of the child is particularly important. For example, the first sound a child should hear after birth is the sound of prayers (Adhan).<sup>6</sup> In Islam, breastfeeding is also a spiritual practice, nourishing the child and fostering the spiritual connection between the child and the mother. Therefore, the Islamic tradition recommends breastfeeding for two years to provide the child with a strong connection with the mother and the sense of feeling loved, protected, and secure.<sup>7</sup>

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?'<sup>8</sup> 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.'<sup>9</sup> Jesus also strongly urged his

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 *Sunan Abu Dawud*, Vol. 5, p. 518, Darul Yusr.

7 *The Qur'an* 2:233.

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

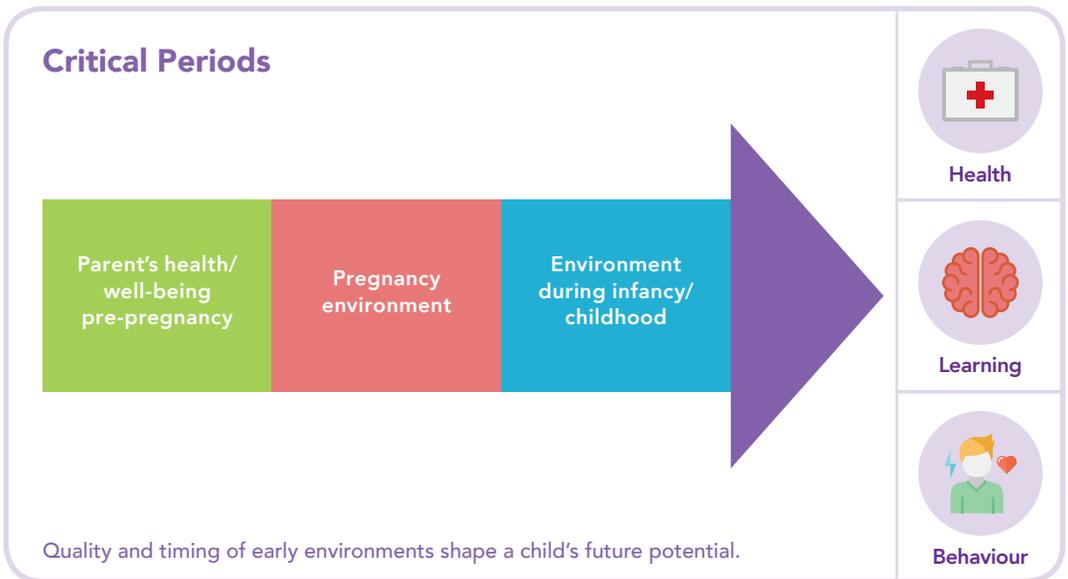
9 *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3–4.

disciples not to discriminate children from receiving their blessings, and promoted their rightful inclusion into the Kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup> As a child, Jesus himself grew in wisdom, stature, and in favour with God and man.<sup>11</sup> This is a pointer to the intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual well-being that is necessary for the holistic nurturing of all children.

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.



<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Mark 10:13–16.  
<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Luke 2:52.

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 a sturdy or a fragile foundation for all of the learning, health, and behaviour that follow.

These 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 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.



### 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.

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## 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 Pre-natal 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 the 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.

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.



## WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?

Every year, children worldwide experience physical punishment from their caregivers, including parents, teachers, and other adults who are there to love and care for them. 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.<sup>12</sup>

In the Middle East and North Africa, 85 per cent of children between the ages of two and fourteen are subjected to violence at home. This results in a total of around 106 million children.<sup>13</sup> In Lebanon, over 80 per cent of children experience violence at home. In fact, Lebanon ranked 19th out of 75 countries in the percentage of children who have experienced violent discipline within a month prior to the admission of the survey, with 15 per cent experiencing severe physical violence.<sup>14</sup>

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 the Divine. 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.

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'.<sup>15</sup>

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.

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

13 UNICEF, *UNICEF Middle East and North Africa Regional Office Annual Report 2018*. February 2019. [https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/MENA\\_2018\\_ROAR.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/about/annualreport/files/MENA_2018_ROAR.pdf), 6, accessed 15 Jul. 2019.

14 UNICEF, *A Profile of Violence against Children and Adolescents in the Middle East and North Africa*, UNICEF, New York, 2018.

15 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

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.

### 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 Lebanon 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.

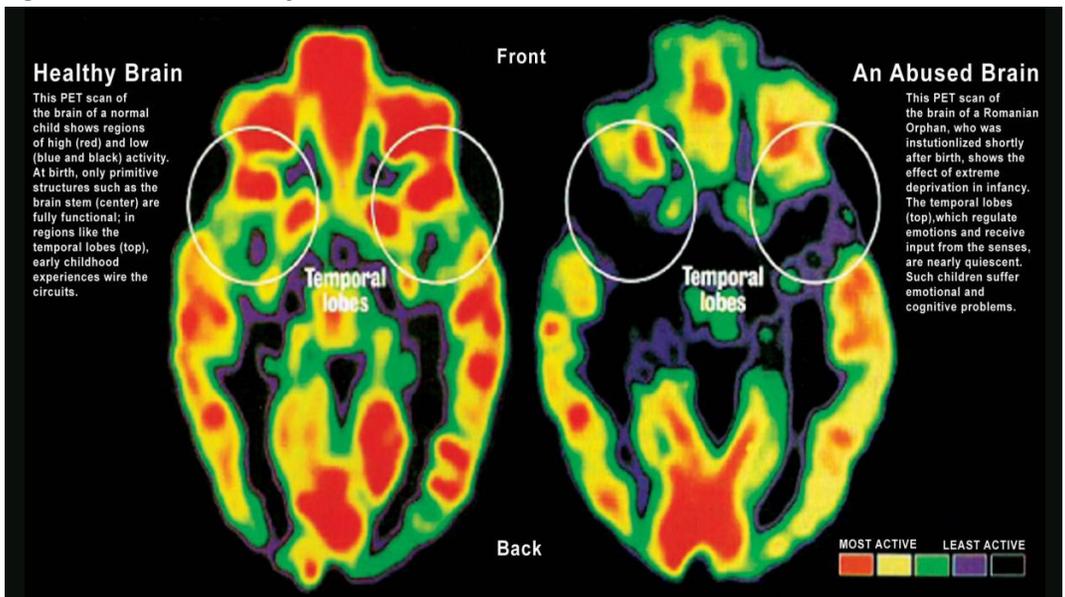


## VIOLENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD'S BRAIN

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 2 PET scan of a healthy brain and an abused brain<sup>19</sup>



17 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.

18 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.

19 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.



## My own reflections

A series of horizontal lines for writing reflections, separated by a dotted line at the top and bottom.

<sup>20</sup> Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, p. 4.

## WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT VIOLENCE IN CHILDHOOD IN LEBANON

After the end of the war in 1990, the economic situation of many Lebanese families improved. The end of the war also meant that Lebanese children were less exposed to vulnerabilities, as Lebanon has achieved considerable progress in raising the living standards in comparison to pre-war levels. However, poverty persists in the country, and so does violence against children. In Lebanon, children are affected by different forms of violence; the magnitude of the phenomenon is also linked to a weak legal framework that does not guarantee comprehensive child protection.

Additionally, as the Arab region is in continuous turmoil, new vulnerable categories of children are deeply affected by violence and marginalization. This includes children on the move, particularly refugee children coming from Syria.



### DRIVERS OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN LEBANON

#### Poverty

The main risk factor for violence and abuse against children is constituted by parental poverty. In particular, economic hardship and unemployment often put parents under considerable stress and frustration. These factors are connected to rising levels of violence against children.

#### Violent discipline is a normal and accepted part of child raising

In 2018, World Vision International conducted a detailed study on violent child discipline.<sup>21</sup> The study consisted of interviewing nearly 1,000 parents in Lebanon to determine the extent to which violence against children at homes is prevalent in Lebanon, as well as parents' opinion about the extent to which violence is dangerous. The study revealed key findings of parents' perception of violence and what is considered violence and what is not. For example, some parents considered that hitting children lightly is not violence, and others considered that violence only refers

21 World Vision Lebanon, *A Mixed Method National Study, Violent Child Discipline in Lebanon, Understanding Perceptions, Children's Reactions and Identifying Predictors*, March 2019, <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/Violent%20Child%20Discipline-%20WVL%20Infographics%20Report.pdf>, accessed 12 Aug. 2019.

to severe hitting without an apparent reason. Parents often admitted that they do not know about alternatives for hitting and scolding; some mentioned that they had been subjected to violence when they were children and that it is the best way to raise their children. Parents also mentioned that they are now in good health regardless of the violence that

they suffered; others said that violence is allowed by religion and traditions. Generally, parents admitted to resorting to violence (physical and psychological) when children have a record of low achievement in school.

The figure below presents some concrete results of the study:

Figure 3<sup>22</sup>



22 World Vision Lebanon, A Mixed Method National Study, Violent Child Discipline in Lebanon, Understanding Perceptions, Children's Reactions and Identifying Predictors, March 2019.



## Ignorance about the long-term impact of violence

In most cases, parents and caregivers resort to violence because they lack awareness about the effects of violence in the long-term and about what hinders child development. However, parents also lack guidance about alternative ways of parenting and about how to communicate with their children in violence-free ways.

## Exposure to the digital world

Children are also exposed to violence they witness on television and video games. The digital world is increasingly presenting a challenge in Lebanon when it comes to violence and especially to online sexual exploitation and abuse.

## Extreme poverty and migration

Violence in Lebanon affects children from all settings and cutting across all socio-economic classes, religious denominations, and ethnic groups. However, certain groups of children are exposed at higher rates to multiple types of violence. This is especially the case for children living under extreme poverty and children of migrants. These two categories of children face additional child protection risks, including sexual exploitation, lack of documentation, lack of healthcare, lack of access to education, and are often victims of child labour.<sup>23</sup>

For girl children, early marriages are rising in Lebanon, particularly among young Palestinian and Syrian refugee girls. This is often arranged by families to protect their daughters from sexual abuse within camps, to provide them with

<sup>23</sup> Insan Association, *Unprotected Childhood: The Experiences of Lebanese and Non-Lebanese Children in Abuse, Maltreatment & Discrimination in Lebanon*, 2014. <https://www.insanassociation.org/en/images/Unprotected%20Childhood%20Report%20-%20INSAN.pdf>, accessed 15 Jul. 2019.

security, and reduce their perceived economic burden. In Lebanon, there is no minimum legal age for marriage, or any civil code regulating personal status matters. This means that there are no legal provisions to address early marriages. The minimum age for marriage differs depending on a person's religion.<sup>24</sup>

## **Inequality and gender-based violence**

Discrimination against girls is one of the most extreme forms of structural violence affecting children in Lebanon. The role of girls is stereotyped within the Lebanese society. Being a housewife and marrying early are seen as prime achievements, and those who marry late are often considered to have limited chances in life.

Abuse against girls and women is profoundly engrained and accepted in many communities; this abuse might include direct violence but also early and forced marriages. Many children in Lebanon grow up witnessing extreme intimate partner violence, which has deep consequences in their physical and emotional development, including in the likelihood of being perpetrators or victims of violence in adulthood. The prevalence of gender-based violence is the result of discriminatory values deeply rooted in society and that have no connection or foundation in religion. As these forms of violence are often normalized, it is important to challenge the social and cultural norms condoning them in order to promote

behavioural change. It is of utmost importance to strengthen prevention and protection measures to protect girls.

## **THE LEBANESE LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

### **1. Violent discipline is a legalized form of violence against children**

Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991, without any reservation, as well as the Covenant of the Rights of the Child in Islam, which is the Arab Regional instrument for Child Protection, making clear national commitments under international and regional human rights standards.

Lebanon has the obligation of prohibiting violence against children explicitly by law. This prohibition must protect all children without discrimination, in all settings, including at home, schools, care institutions, the workplace, and in their communities. However, the Lebanese legal framework is not adequate to protect children from all forms of violence and, in some cases, it justifies the use of violence for disciplining children. For example, article 186 of the Lebanese Penal Code states, 'The law permits the types of discipline inflicted on children by their parents as sanctioned by general custom.'<sup>25</sup>

Currently, the only law that refers to the prevention of violence against children is Law 422 on juvenile justice. This law, passed

<sup>24</sup> Girls not Brides, Lebanon. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/lebanon/>, accessed 28 Jul. 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Insan Association, *Unprotected Childhood*.

in 2002, does not address all types of violence against children. It does not outline the conditions endangering a child more specifically and considers physical violence as dangerous 'only if exceeding culturally-accepted discipline'.<sup>26</sup>

To address violence against children, Lebanon needs to carry out a comprehensive policy reform process and to review the legislation in order to remove any legal defence or justification that authorizes corporal or humiliating punishment.

## **2. Corporal punishment in schools is widespread and teachers go unsanctioned**

Violence in the name of discipline is also used in schools despite its prohibition by the 2001 Memorandum of the Minister of Education and the 2018 Child Protection Policy launched by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. The policy explicitly prohibits all corporal punishment and should lead to improvements in responding to violence at school. The child protection policy represents a significant and positive step towards realizing children's rights to a safe school environment. It does not, however, sufficiently address the key problem of impunity for school teachers, supervisors, directors, and support staff who harm children in the name of discipline. The phenomenon of violence against children

in schools is so widespread in Lebanon that parents often pull their children out from the schools<sup>27</sup>.

## **3. A restrictive framework for birth registration undermines children's right to identity**

A restrictive framework for birth registration for children of migrants and refugees undermines children's rights, particularly their right to an identity. It also presents a high risk of putting children into statelessness, which affects the fulfilment of other rights, such as health and education. In Lebanon, the current framework does not cover all children born in the territory, and the law does not allow women to grant their nationality to their children when married to a foreign husband. This has critical implications for refugee children.

<sup>26</sup> World Vision Lebanon, *Twenty Years On: Children and their Rights in Lebanon*, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, *I Don't Want My Child to Be Beaten: Corporal Punishment in Lebanon's Schools*, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/13/i-dont-want-my-child-be-beaten/corporal-punishment-lebanons-schools>, accessed 15 Jul. 2019.



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



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, respond in more positive manners to their needs, and to help creating safe and respectful spaces for them to explore their interconnections with others.

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 turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>28</sup> 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.'<sup>29</sup> 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

responsibility with others and the community. 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.

28 *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3.

29 *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Mark 12:30–31.

## 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 Lebanon, 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 institutions provide a large portion of services, including healthcare and education. Religion is tightly connected in the daily lives of people in Lebanon 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 Lebanon can play a key role in strengthening child protection

mechanisms 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 by religious communities 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.’<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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.

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.

30 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.

31 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



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. Religious leaders can contribute to supporting nurturing environments and positive parenting practices by reflecting on the scriptures and providing a positive theological understanding of the child.

Once, while 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.'<sup>32</sup> This calls for reconsidering the way of dealing with children based on love and compassion. When a parent kisses his child and 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 spirituality and contribute to the identity formation of the child, to their self-esteem, and to their sense of security.

In Christianity, multiple passages demonstrate the love of God for children and how Jesus treated children with dignity and respect. Jesus said, 'Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>33</sup> Another passage proclaims the highest appreciation of children, indicating how we need to treat children with dignity

32 Al-Bukhari and Muslim.

33 *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Matthew 19:14.

and to respect their divinity. It says, 'See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.'<sup>34</sup> This passage indicates the high consideration that Jesus had for children and the special place they have in Christianity. This also considers children as a source of inspiration for the practice of religion, inviting adults to learn from them.

How can religious leaders work with parents and caregivers to break the vicious cycle of violence being passed down from one generation to another? How can they contribute to promoting values and norms that foster respect and affirmation of the dignity of the child?

Some practical examples of actions are presented in the following pages.

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



34 The Holy Bible, Matthew 18:10.



## Advocate for a comprehensive child protection system

Religious leaders can mobilize and take action in the following areas:

- Advocate to policymakers to make the necessary reforms to the Lebanese legal framework on child protection, and emphasize the important role religious leaders play in helping to raise awareness among parents and caregivers, and apply those laws.
- Ask your national government to invest more in early childhood and produce better data on violence against children.
- Campaign to achieve prohibition of corporal punishment and other humiliating practices in the home, alternative care settings, day care and schools.
- Support the creation of child helplines for children 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 and child marriage, or support the creation of a comprehensive birth registration system, among others.



## Create a safe space 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 faith tradition?
- What are the types of violence affecting young children in our community?
- What can we do to prevent and end violence?

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.



## Transform norms through the interpretation of scriptures

In Lebanon parents and caregivers often use violent discipline with their children, and some people justify violence against children based on their misinterpretation of religious texts. For this reason, it is of paramount importance for religious leaders to mobilize their communities and to raise awareness about interpretations of scriptures that sanction the use of violence against children.

Based on misinterpretations of some Islamic teachings, violence against children was, at times,, violence against children was, at times, justified in the name of discipline. However, today's prevailing interpretations are based on principles of child raising that include rewards and means of discipline that are non-violent. Islam punishes those who do not deal compassionately and peacefully with others; love and compassion are key elements of child raising promoted by the Islamic tradition.<sup>35</sup>

Christianity also highlights the sacredness of the child. God came to us in the form of a child. From this moment, Christianity offered a vision of a child that is divine, as opposed to the prevailing mentality, at the time when Jesus was born, that made the child invisible in the society. Christ the child incarnated a blessing and salvation; when child protection is secured so is God's blessing.

Recalling the images of children as blessings and gifts, and the affirmation of their dignity

in all religious traditions, we cannot deny that there is a contradiction with the reality children face in our communities and the teachings of our religions. This leads to reflecting on the following:

- How can we hit someone who is given to us as a gift and a blessing?
- What is going through our minds when we raise our hand against the child in our care?
- How can we take a cane against another human being and not face legal consequences?
- How often do we acknowledge children's views and ideas instead of ignoring their views or asking them to stop asking questions?

This realization calls for religious traditions and their members to employ self-examination on our understanding of nurturing children. Self-examination of practices that condone violence against children should start within our religious communities, places of worship, and homes. By acknowledging that we, at times, are also perpetrators of violence in direct or indirect ways, we contribute to de-normalizing violence and making it visible, which in turn helps address its root causes and take concrete action.

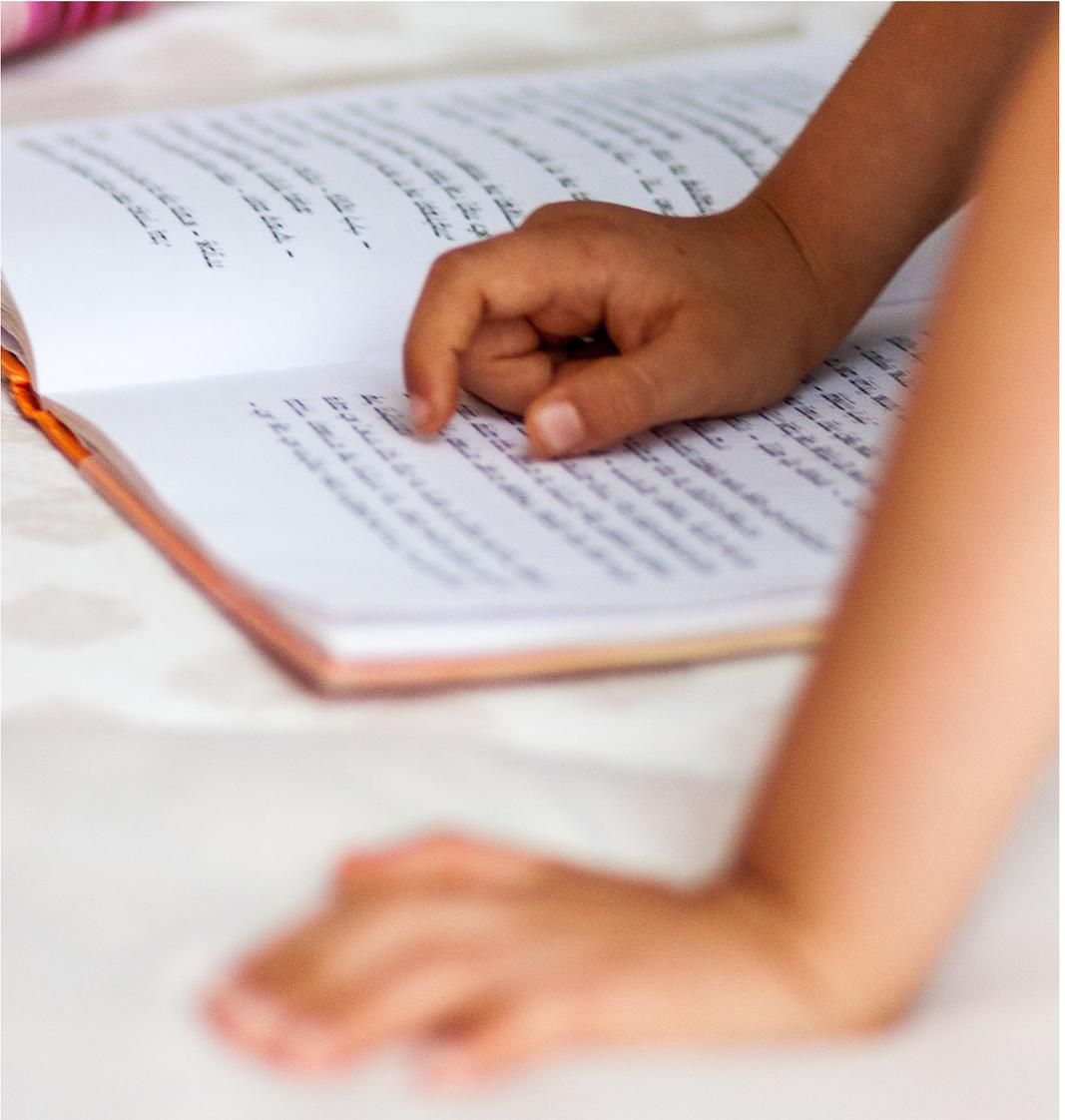
The way children are raised is the basis for building children's character as well as their society. Therefore, it is important for adults to use methods that encourage and empower children and refrain from using violent methods such as hitting or shouting that

<sup>35</sup> *Musnad of Imam Ahmad*, Vol. 3, p. 112.

affects their self-esteem; it is also important to listen to children and engage in dialogue with them.

Building on these reflections, religious communities are called to influence families, parents, and caregivers to de-normalize

violence against children and disconnect violent discipline practices from religion. This can be done by raising awareness about children's rights and the responsibility that parents have to raise children, physically, socio-emotionally, and also spiritually.





Get Inspired

## **CHANNELS OF HOPE: SUPPORTING CHILD PROTECTION THROUGH FAITH AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS**

Channels of Hope is World Vision's signature programme that mobilizes religious leaders and their communities to transform children's lives by addressing challenging issues. World Vision International and Islamic Relief Worldwide have been working together since 2014 to adapt the methodology of the programme and customize it to work with Muslim religious communities. In 2018, World Vision Lebanon and Islamic Relief Lebanon organized a Channels of Hope workshop in Lebanon to adapt the programme to challenge issues regarding child protection, involving local religious leaders and child protection experts who contributed to the development of the approach and methodology.

Channels of Hope is both a methodology and a mobilization process. The methodology begins with an interactive facilitated process to create a safe space for religious leaders and faith communities to learn, share, and debate. It focuses on examining the root causes and deepest convictions that impact attitudes, norms, values, and practices towards the most vulnerable children and people to bring behavioural change.

The process is grounded in discussing principles from the participants' Holy Scriptures. The programme is designed to move the heart, transmit technical knowledge, and motivate a sustained and effective response to significant issues by equipping religious leaders to apply the sacred texts to positively respond to key social issues, work to alleviate the conditions that impede the safety and protection of children, and encourage other religious leaders to do the same in their communities. The process is focused on partnering with local religious leaders, their congregations and communities to empower them to meet community needs on a sustainable basis.

Participants of the Channels of Hope Child Protection Programme in Lebanon expressed personal transformation related to the protection of children and its relationship with the religious ministry. In Lebanon many child protection challenges stem from the inadequate use of standards and poor child residential care facilities. Working within the confines of the country's legal framework, Channels of Hope Child Protection Lebanon has contributed to the psychosocial well-being of children of separated parents through the provision of a safe and child-friendly space where children can spend time with estranged parents. The programme has also played a key role in terms of raising awareness around a range of social development issues from HIV to maternal mortality. A wide cohort of religious leaders has also been trained on gender-based violence prevention in addition to child protection.

Source: Islamic Relief Worldwide, *Lebanon Channels of Hope Child Protection*, <https://www.islamic-relief.org/lebanon-channels-of-hope-child-protection/> accessed 12 Aug. 2019.)



## Raise awareness and join advocacy efforts at regional and national levels

The famous poem *My Heart Leaps Up*, by William Wordsworth, says, ‘The child is the father of the man.’<sup>36</sup> This makes us reflect on the idea that an adult is the product of the habits, manners, and behaviours nurtured during childhood. Raising a child is, thus, like building a woman’s and a man’s future; children will become mothers or fathers who will raise their own children the way they were raised.

Often, adults resort to violence because that is the best way they know to raise children. For this reason, it is crucial to raise awareness and inform parents and caregivers about the following:

- Children’s rights and the obligations of the State to protect children and respect their rights, as a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- 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. 14)
- The benefits of positive parenting (refer to p. 36).
- 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 also use social media and TV or radio to raise awareness about the impact of violence in children. They can also share narratives that challenge social norms condoning violence, using theological reflections that uphold the human dignity of the child and the sacredness of their lives.

<sup>36</sup> W. Wordsworth, *My heart leaps up*, 1802, <https://poets.org/poem/my-heart-leaps>, accessed 12 Jul. 2019.

## Interfaith Collaborations to End Violence

Challenging social norms that condone violence against children, particularly in the early years, requires all religious communities in Lebanon to come together and take action. Religious leaders from the different denominations can join hands in action to end violence against children. This would be particularly effective to advocate for a policy change and to strengthen child protection mechanisms in the country.

Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, invited religious leaders around the globe to join efforts to protect the dignity of children. This is reflected in the jointly signed *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together* where they invite 'all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together.' It also highlights the importance of the family in nurturing solidarity, fraternity, and peace in children, and it reaffirms the right of children to grow up in a family environment, to receive nutrition and education, denouncing those practices that violate the dignity and rights of children.

Source: A document on *Human fraternity for world peace and living together*, Abu Dhabi (4 February 2019). [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco\\_20190204\\_documento-fratellanza-umana.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html), accessed 26 Jul. 2019.



### Make religious communities child-friendly places

Nurturing ethical values and spirituality in children is very important as it contributes to the holistic and healthy development of a child. Places of worship can be spaces for children to be in touch with their inner selves and to discover themselves and others, through spiritual nourishing. Religious communities need to become safe environments for children.

Religious leaders can:

- Create spaces within the places of worship to listen to children, as this can become a form of child protection.
- Lead the development of child safeguarding policies in their places of worship, by creating measures to prevent

and report child abuse, enhance child participation, create safe spaces to talk about it, and develop mechanisms to support and protect children victims of violence. This includes creating awareness not only on the impact of violence on children but also of the consequences for parents and caregivers who use violence against the child.

- Make use of visits to homes to identify signs that a child is at risk of violence. Religious leaders often play the role of counsellors and are trusted with sensitive information around children and family. This role can be strengthened with more training to address issues of violence against children and provide support to parents and caregivers. There is a limit to the extent of such intervention by religious leaders and, therefore, it is important that they can make referrals to the appropriate support needed.



## 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.

Religious communities support parents and caregivers in many ways, but what distinguishes faith-based support from others is that they cover the practicality of childcare, and also what lies behind it. In other words, what religious communities do derives from their understanding of the child and from the importance of ethical values and spirituality in the child's upbringing. Notably, religious communities embody a space where action can be taken holistically with both parents and caregivers, and children. This intergenerational work can be effective in breaking the cycle of violence and encouraging children to flourish and thrive to their fullest potential.

Families and caregivers' awareness of children's spirituality can enrich and strengthen interaction in the family and help build a relationship that reflects a caring environment of mutual respect and learning, appreciation, and sharing.

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. 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, they have to find ways to raise children that place them at the centre and protect them from violence.

### Actions to support parents and caregivers:



Encourage positive parenting



Support parenting based on communication and dialogue



Stress the importance of role modelling



Strengthen the agency of the child



## Encourage positive parenting

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 with them, rather than turning to corporal or verbal abuse of the child.

The support of religious leaders to parents and caregivers is critical to foster the understanding and practice of alternative methods of parenting. Religious leaders can raise awareness about positive, non-violent ways of disciplining children, about the benefit of effective communication between parents and children, and promoting healthy habits from the early years.

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 becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>37</sup>

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,<sup>38</sup> 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.

Parents are invited to unlearn the child upbringing practices that violate children's physical and emotional well-being in favour of parenting that is violent free, more positive, and empowering.



### 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.

<sup>37</sup> *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition*, Matthew 18:3–4.

<sup>38</sup> Qur'an Surah Luqman.

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.

What can parents and caregivers do?

- 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 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.
- Empower your children by assigning them tasks and responsibilities that are age appropriate; this will strengthen their sense of accomplishment and self-confidence.
- Refrain from always saying 'no' to your child and, instead, allow the child to experience and discover.



Get Inspired

## **THE MOTHER-CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAMME (MOCEP): EMPOWERING MOTHERS TO PROMOTE THE CHILD'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT**

Since 2009, the Arab Resource Collective (ARC) and Mother Child Education Foundation (AÇEV) have collaborated to implement the MOCEP programme in Lebanon. The Programme offers an opportunity to strengthen families living in refugee camps, an environment marked by disadvantage and long-term displacement.

The programme has two main elements: the cognitive education programme and the mother support programme. The cognitive education programme is a 25-week-long, home-based, low-cost training programme for children from five to six years of age who do not have access to preschool education services, and for their mothers. The mother support programme is a positive parenting training for mothers that includes preparing mothers to support the cognitive and socio-emotional development of the child. The mother support programme includes modules on how to create nurturing environments in the house that are free of violence and where the dignity of the child is respected. The goal of the programme is to equip parents to create consistent and positive interactions with their children, improving communication, and understanding of the child. The mother support programme consists of 25 sessions during 25 weeks; each meeting lasts about three hours, and each group is formed by 25–30 mothers of all ages. The learning methodology is participatory and engaging; trainers use dialogue, role-plays, exercises, and mothers are also encouraged to practise the techniques they will use to nurture their children, to strengthen their self-confidence and their resilience.

MOCEP has had a transformative impact on the lives and well-being of participating families. Initial reports indicate that programme participants experience less conflict and violence and greater harmony within their families, as well as greater female empowerment. These positive outcomes can be attributed to the consistent nature of the high-quality parent-child interactions promoted throughout the programme.

The programme has also had a transformative effect on the communities, as mothers are encouraged during the sessions to share what they learn with their relatives and community members. Mothers attending the programme feel transformed and empowered, and they are keen to share further what they have learned.



## Support parenting based on communication and dialogue

Parents often recur to violence, without even listening to the child or allowing the child to explain why a certain behaviour took place. It is important to communicate and explain to children, listening to what they have to say, instead of recurring to violence. For example, we should refrain from simply ordering children and forbidding them to play without a reason; as parents and caregivers, we should take the time to explain to them why, for instance, they have to stop playing now and why it is time for another activity.

A parenting model based on communication and dialogue, allows parents to learn from their children, to be closer to them, and to better understand their needs and aspirations.

A common remark we often hear from parents is, 'If you do well in school, I will love you very much.' Parents often use conditional love; some parents tell their children that they love them only when behaving in a good way. This is a type of emotional violence to the child. The child should always feel loved and appreciated by the parents.

What can parents and caregivers do?

- Learn how to communicate and explain to children, refraining from telling children what to do without explaining why.
- Use a positive language to speak to 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!

When we communicate with our children, it is also important to refrain from using comments such as 'a man doesn't cry'; these expressions contribute to reinforcing negative masculinity and to preventing children from feeling and expressing their emotions. These expressions are not conducive to an open and nurturing communication with the child.

It is important for the child to know that the love of their parents and caregivers is unconditional. No matter how they do in school or in sports, or if they misbehave sometimes, parents will always love them. Unconditional love makes the child feel secure and appreciated and contributes to building the child's character, identity, and self-esteem from an early age.

Parenting with unconditional love also means refraining from threatening children with harsh and unreasonable expressions such as 'I will kill you if... ' or by offending the child with name-

calling or other expressions. The Holy Qur'an prohibits cursing persons and animals and says, 'A true believer is not involved in taunting, or frequently cursing (others) or in indecency or abusing.'<sup>39</sup> So why do we curse our children? Parenting should be about unconditional love, encouraging, praising, and respect.

39 The Hadith, Riyad as-Saliheen, Book of Prohibited Actions, Hadith 45.



## Stress the importance of role modelling

**Your son or daughter is like you with his or her bad and good attributes as you are solely responsible for his or her education before God.**

– Sheikh Kasem Jabak<sup>40</sup>

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.

Islam underlines that parents have to be living examples since children pick up values and knowledge by imitating their elders.<sup>41</sup> This helps create a space of mutual attention for both parents and children based on love and devotion, leaving no room for violent means to discipline children. Parents need to be role models for their children, and they cannot model violence as a way to obtain respect.

In Christianity, upholding the sanctity of life is central to the affirmation of the faith. Violence, whether physical, structural, psychological or in whichever form it expresses itself, is a denial and abuse of life and goes against the foundations of love and compassion. ‘My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.’<sup>42</sup>

The only way to stop the cycle of violence is for parents to model non-violence and positive attitudes and values.

It is crucial for parents to practise the values they would like their children to follow, as opposed to trying to impose those values with fear and punishments. Values cannot be preached but they need to be nurtured in a safe environment free of violence and fear.

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.

<sup>40</sup> Speaking about positive parenting and nurturing spirituality. Report of the Lebanon round table discussion on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence held on 2 May 2019.

<sup>41</sup> *The Qur’an* 61:2-3.

<sup>42</sup> *The Holy Bible*, John 15:12 -13.



## 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 to 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.<sup>43</sup>

The Qur'an teaches us to maintain two fundamental principles with regards 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.

Children are whole persons and not an extension of parents. Their individuality needs to be respected. Parents are encouraged 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*:

43 Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 7 (2005). CRC/C/GC/7/Rev.1 20 September 2006. [https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/general\\_comments/GC7.Rev.1\\_en.doc.html](https://www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/general_comments/GC7.Rev.1_en.doc.html), accessed 11 Jul. 2019



## 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.

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.

As religious leaders and communities in Lebanon are engaged in providing education and day care services, they can be the drivers of change

and be a catalyst of transformation, engaging with teachers and the school administration.

The following are ideas for actions for teachers to make schools safe and inclusive.

### 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 to build resilience, particularly relevant for children affected by conflict.
- 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.



Get Inspired

## **SUPPORTING SYRIAN CHILDREN WITH RESILIENCE BUILDING AND PEACE EDUCATION**

As a response to the Syrian crisis, since 2013, Adyan works on increasing the level of resilience in the Syrian communities, through a project entitled Building Resilience and Reconciliation (BRR).

BRR has several components that include interfaith mediation dialogue and peace education courses for children between the ages of seven and fifteen. The peace education programme focuses on strengthening the resilience of children affected by the conflict. It includes modules about psychosocial support, learning about diversity and reconciliation, learning about inclusive citizenship, and human rights and child rights. Children are empowered to rediscover values and principles and to imagine ways to rebuild their communities after the war.

The programme is implemented with the involvement of Syrian educators among the refugee population in Lebanon and others inside Syria to increase the local capacity of teachers. Educators are being trained to pursue peace and reconciliation initiatives among children, in formal and non-formal ways.

Adyan also established an interfaith network of Syrian religious leaders and faith-based activists to support community cohesion and to support the initiatives of reconciliation of the children.

Adyan is a Foundation for diversity, solidarity and human dignity. Registered as an NGO in Lebanon, Adyan works locally, regionally and internationally for pluralism, inclusive citizenship, community resilience, and spiritual solidarity, through home grown solutions in Education, Media, Policy, and intercultural and interreligious relations.

Source: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2016. Investing in Young Children for Peaceful Societies: Proceedings of a Joint Workshop by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine; UNICEF; and the King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), 2016, p. 41.



## Create nurturing environments for children

Schools need to become nurturing environments for children that help them 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.'<sup>45</sup>

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.<sup>46</sup>
  - 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.

45 Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990).

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

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 God. 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. 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 Lebanon, where many schools are run by religious organizations.

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.



## Make your actions speak for themselves

Children learn best by example; this is especially true in the early years of life. Values cannot be taught, but they need to be modelled. Teachers and caregivers are key actors in fostering positive attitudes and nurturing values during the child's 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!





## 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 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 with 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.



## Practise participatory learning methodologies

The active participation of children in learning through play, singing, praying, and introspection in the early ages 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 to grow together.

Learning opportunities can include the following:

- Create opportunities for conversations and open dialogues with the teachers and other children; young children need to have the space to be heard and express themselves.
  - Encourage the development of positive relationships across cultures and religions.
  - Allow getting to know people of different religions and cultures.
- Actively encourage young children to collaborate, play, sing, and come together to pray and meditate.



## **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 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.

How can this be done?

- Create activities for children to practise empathy with other children and with those who are less privileged.
- Embrace diversity in the school and create dialogue about differences and commonalities.
- Teach children their rights and how ethical values help them uphold their rights and affirm the rights of others.
- Organize service-learning activities for children to practise their individual and collective responsibilities.
- Create dialogue spaces for children to share their feelings and experiences and to listen to one another.
- Create spaces for silence, reflection, to be with nature, to pray, and be grateful.
- Teach children how to solve problems in non-violent ways; ask them to find solutions to the problems they face.



## 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 the 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 dialogue<sup>47</sup>

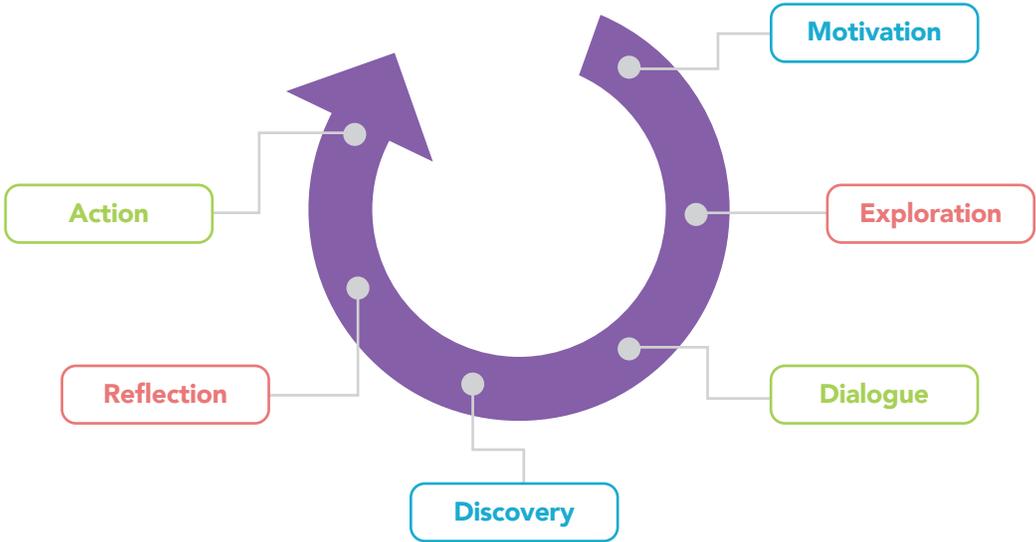
Share these points with the participants before the dialogue, so it is a safe and respectful place for all who take part:

- 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.

47 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](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.<sup>48</sup>



## Motivation:

Start the meeting with a meditation or a 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.

<sup>48</sup> 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 55. 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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