

# INSPIREd Faith Communities:

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

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11-12 April 2019  
Coimbatore, India

### REPORT OF ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION





Brief report of the roundtable discussion:

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

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The National Roundtable Discussion on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence was the second of a series of roundtables that are being held around the world as part of the work on an International Consortium to raise awareness on the impact of violence on early childhood development and the critical role that spirituality and values-based education can play in strengthening children's upbringing and well-being.

The Roundtable Discussion was organized by Shanti Ashram, a member of the Consortium, in collaboration with several local partners, and other members of the Consortium including Arigatou International and World Vision India.

For two days, 140 participants from 59 organizations and 18 states in India including religious leaders, representatives from faith-based and civil society organizations, academia, paediatricians, educators, young people and experts on children's issues, met to discuss the importance of early childhood, the impact of violence on children's development, how to nurture values and spirituality in the family, schools, religious communities and society at large, and discuss ways to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood.

On the first day, 250 participants joined the opening ceremony, including 100 students from Avinashilingam University for Women that also partnered with the organizers.



Participants discussed the role of religious communities, how different stakeholders can work together, challenges in their communities as well as strategies that work to prevent and address violence in early childhood and that help creating nurturing spaces for children where ethical values and spirituality are fostered.

This meeting was part of a series of national roundtable discussions organised by the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood within the framework of a project funded by the INSPIRE Fund that aims to mobilise religious communities to reflect on and prompt joint action with different stakeholders to challenge social and cultural norms that condone and justify violence in early childhood, provide support to parents and caregivers, as well as foster quality education and life skills, while creating safe spaces to nurturer ethical values and spirituality.

4. Identify the socio-economic factors, policies and strategies that affect early childhood development.
5. Share good practices from faith communities and civil society organizations that foster holistic approaches to early childhood for the prevention of violence.
6. Learn about INSPIRE among faith communities, government representatives, and grassroots organizations.

## **Objectives of the Roundtable Discussion**

1. Discuss the scientific evidence on the importance of Early Childhood Development related to children's learning and development, including its long-term impact on fostering their health and well-being.
2. Discuss the role of faith communities in nurturing values and spirituality in children, and challenging cultural and social norms that condone violence in early childhood and its effects on the whole child.
3. Reflect on the state of violence against children in early childhood in the country, particularly in the family and school settings.

## DAY ONE: 11 APRIL



### WELCOME

Dr S.R. Subramanaian, Senior Manager at Shanti Ashram and Ms Pavithra Rajagopalan, International Trainer of the Learning to Live Together (LTLT) Programme and Expert on Early Childhood, welcomed the participants on behalf of Shanti Ashram and the organizers and introduced the objectives of the roundtable discussion.

Ms Maria Lucia Uribe, Director of Arigatou International Geneva, began by thanking Shanti Ashram, the local partners and religious leaders that were present and that made this roundtable discussion possible. She mentioned that the India Round Table 2019 is one of five round table discussions that are taking place around the world, and are organized by the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence. The consortium aims to bring together experts on the prevention of violence, early childhood

and education, and represent civil society, faith-based organizations, multilateral agencies and academia.

Ms Uribe noted that despite recent investment and focus on early childhood, the topic of nurturing spirituality and values has not been at the core of early childhood development. She also highlighted that 80% of the brain develops in the first three years of a child's life. The scientific evidence shows that violence in early childhood has a negative impact on children's health, academic performance, development of relations with others, and their ethical demands decrease as they grow up. Moreover, violence during early childhood makes children more prone to use violence as a means to resolve conflicts as adults. Violence in early childhood also affects the way children see and relate to "others"; if they are raised to see others in negative ways, they will learn to discriminate and see differences as barriers instead of opportunities to relate



to one another. Ms Uribe emphasised that violence against children creates not only a physical but also a spiritual disruption on the child. Not only is their essence of life broken, but also their interconnectedness with other people. Ms Uribe underlined the critical need to strengthen all of the child's support systems to create an environment that nourishes their proper development, at school, in religious communities, in society, and at home.

Dr Kezevino Aram, Director of Shanti Ashram, shared that India is home to the largest number of children in the world, and stated, "If you put the world map in front to you and look at every young person, every fourth person, man or woman, would be Indian". She reflected on the vital role adults have in supporting the development of children and youth. Dr Aram noted that India has done well on many fronts regarding helping young people: "For example, life expectancy since 1941 for little girls has improved, going from 32 years old to over 64 years old in the service villages of Shanti Ashram". Nonetheless, she noted that it is crucial to reflect on how both science and spirituality can do more to improve children's well-being. Dr Aram also highlighted important

events taking place this year that make this conversation on protecting early childhood from violence noteworthy. For example, this year is Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birthday, and, November marks the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), signed by almost all countries in the world. These are unique opportunities to reflect and join actions to do more for children's well-being.

## OPENING REMARKS

Dr. Krishnaraj Vanavarayar, Chairman of Bharatava Vidva Bhavan, thanked the organizers for the timely discussion on ending violence in early childhood through educational and spiritual intervention. Dr Vanavarayar stressed that the Indian roundtable is a good and significant beginning to create dialogue about the necessary steps to improve the well-being of children, and also stressed that everyone present must collaborate and take action in order to resolve this issue. He remarked the significance of gathering 75 participants from 18 different states and 20 religious leaders together to talk about issues concerning the well-being of children. Having run many schools and colleges, Dr Vanavarayar noted that materialism has caused stress on the child. Schools have become competitive places where students are encouraged to mug up knowledge rather than to participate in authentic learning, ultimately making it unbearable for the child.

Additionally, he spoke about the modern economic models that are teaching people that only the fit shall survive, even though Mahatma Gandhi taught us that society should make everyone fit to survive. These societal trends,



Dr Kezevino Aram

he emphasised, eventually reflect on the family and negatively affect the child. In view of this, Dr Krishnaraj Vanavarayar stressed the importance of making a society that is equitable, collaborative, and, above all, safer for the development of children. He highlighted the value of bringing together science and spirituality, which are

interdependent, in resolving the violence in early childhood. He ended by saying, "All of us know what has gone wrong and all of us know what needs to be done to end violence against children, but the question is do we have the courage to do something about it?"

## OPEN DIALOGUE

Representatives of the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism.



### Swami Sadatmananda Saraswathi

Chief Acharya

**Q1: How does the Hindu tradition view early childhood?**

Swami Saraswathi first stated that spirituality is a commitment to inner self-growth, leading to a discovery of one's higher dimension and a connection with the world and the Almighty. After laying a foundation for the meaning of spirituality, Chief Acharya said that children are divinely created by God to be seen as blessings and opportunities for parents to grow, both

physically and spiritually. Specifically, Swami Sadatmananda Saraswathi said, "Children are looked upon as blessings from the Lord... they are seen as expressions of divinity from the Lord himself and as an opportunity given to the parents to grow... [Specifically] when parents bring up their children, they themselves are brought up. That is why the age of the mother and the child are the same". Chief Acharya's words emphasised that the Hindu tradition believes that early childhood affects the spirituality of the parent and that children's spirituality needs to be nurtured so that they can understand themselves and God better.

### Dr Christopher S. Baskeran

Associate Director of Church Relations and Interfaith Engagement, World Vision India

**Q2: How do we allow ourselves, as people of faith, to bridge this gap between the ideal and the real?**

Dr Baskeran cited an example from the Bible where Jesus says, "Let children come to me", asking his disciples not to stop them from





coming close to him. Through this example, Dr Baskaran shows that Christians should view children as having qualities worthy of following such as inclusivity, spirituality, and humility. Dr Baskaran ended by stating that in most contexts, people expect children to learn from adults, but adults should also learn from children.

## Professor Akhtharul Wasey

President, Maulana Azad University,  
Jodhpur, Rajasthan

**Q3: Are there some practical lessons from working with religious leaders and other stakeholders that can be taken from your work supporting the eradication of polio in India?**

Professor Wasey shared that one of the most important lessons he learned was the importance of providing basic needs for all people, regardless of their background. He brought together communities, with the help of religious leaders, to end the last bit of polio in India. This demonstrated that through the



power of coming together, through an interfaith approach, society can improve. Moreover, he explained that there are four essential things all children need using the acronym EFGH: E – Education, F – Food, G – Good upbringing, and H – Health. He stressed the importance of religious leaders providing these needs without ulterior motives. He said, “Our duty is to communicate, not to convert”. Given this, he encouraged participants to embody India’s virtue of religious pluralism and for leaders of all faiths to live together in harmony, demonstrating a positive model for children to follow. As head of the department of Islamic studies in 1996, Professor Wasey encouraged his students to study other religious traditions different from their own. He suggested that all educational institutions should adopt this type of curriculum because it helps one learn about another’s point of view and way of life. He ended by saying, “We should not forget one thing, that religious pluralism is here not because of me or you, but because it is the will and design of God”. Professor Wasey’s words gave concrete solutions on how to bridge the ideal and the real in order to solve violence against children, through interfaith collaboration.

## Swami Atmapriyananda

Vice Chancellor of Vivekananda University  
at Kolkata

**Q4: How do you, as a senior religious leader, ensure that the true lessons of spirituality go to all children?**

Vice Chancellor Swami Atmapriyananda stressed the importance of good people being strongly committed to their beliefs. He highlighted the importance of people coming together to make those strong convictions a reality. He advised participants not to idealise the real and, instead, to realize the ideal. Swami Atmapriyananda cited the great example of Mahatma Gandhi, who realized the ideal of non-violence. He recalled, "Mahatma Gandhi's life is the most glorious example today showing that non-violence and truths can actually evict one of the most powerful imperial kingdoms in the world". Swami Atmapriyananda expressed that ending child violence against children can be possible in this world.



## Mr Brian D'Silva

Trustee/Director, UDISHA Project, Mumbai

**Q5: As someone who works with children, what do you think religious leaders can do to help children?**

Mr D'Silva stressed the importance of knowing that children are divine and, consequently, adults can learn from them. He emphasised that we should not lose this aspect of being in front of a child who is divine, as they will be an inspiration for us. Mr D'Silva highlighted that adults should be aware of how their actions positively and negatively affect the lives of the children they are in contact with.

## Swami Gowmara Adigalar

The Fourth & Present Pontiff of Kumara  
Matalayam, Chinnavedampatti, Coimbatore

**Q6: How can reform be used within religion to bring about the best of religion, and how can this be linked to teaching children?**

Swami Gowmara Adigalar talked about how families can be a unit that teaches values to children. He spoke about local traditions and how communities can be carriers of values, as





well as the importance of fostering relationships and love in one's community and families. Lastly, he emphasised the importance of sharing knowledge and allowing theories to be retrieved at different moments in life.

## Mr Gurupreeth Singh

President of Gurudwara Singh Sabha

**Q7: How have you, as a young Sikh living as part of a minority group in a majority area, brought faith to young people, and at the same time interacted with the community and its religious and cultural views?**

Mr Gurupreeth Singh mentioned that his interfaith learning came from his parents. From childhood, his parents always allowed him to mingle with different people. He would always eat food different from his culture and meet people different from his tradition. Presently, Mr Singh has his own children and he, too, allows his children to learn from cultures and traditions from all over the world. This principle of inclusivity has been so ingrained in his daily life that when he prays, he begins his prayer with "God is one" and finishes his prayer by saying "God is universal" and offering a benediction to all people in the world. Mr



Singh ended his response by saying that as Sikh in his community, he has never felt like a minority in his town. His parents' teachings and his faith have taught him not only to value his tradition and religion but also to value new traditions and religions from his surroundings.

## Dr Priya M. Vaidhya

Assistant Professor of the Department of Philosophy at Mumbai University

**Q8: How can we bring religion to children, in a way that is simple, accessible, and useful?**

Dr Vaidhya said that children are evidence of the divine and that religion is a learned concept. Because of this, one should focus on the human dimension of the religion of unity and love to



teach children how to relate to one another. One of the best ways she has found to teaching children about religion and relating to other people is by playing games that teach them about love. For example, she said, "When we see children play, there is a 'you and the other' dynamic... the best way is to play games that help children connect with one another". She ended by saying that knowing the best in one's religion will help one to know and understand God and the "other" more.



## Mr Stevenson Khongsngi

Former Associate Director, World Vision India

### Q9: How can adults introduce spirituality to children?

Mr Stevenson highlighted the fact that values and morals are first taught at home. For example, because Mr Stevenson comes from a matriarchal society, his family places high respect toward women. This upbringing has allowed him to view life differently than his colleagues who have grown up in a patriarchal family. Mr Stevenson says that values such as respect for all women, need to start at home, and, more importantly, parents should make their homes "places where they will see God".

## Acharya Mahashraman Ji deciple Shramani Somyapragya

### Q10: How do you bring spirituality to children?

A Jain nun spoke about the balance between the capacities of the left and the right hemispheres. Often, students are taught to focus on one side of the brain, the left side, which focuses on language, writing, and reading and other technical abilities. But the right side of the brain is the one that supports creativity and helps emotional development. Education systems focus more often than not on the development of the left side of the brain. Developing the right side of the brain empowers children to help to manage and to label their emotions. Parents should also help nurture the creative and emotional side of their children.

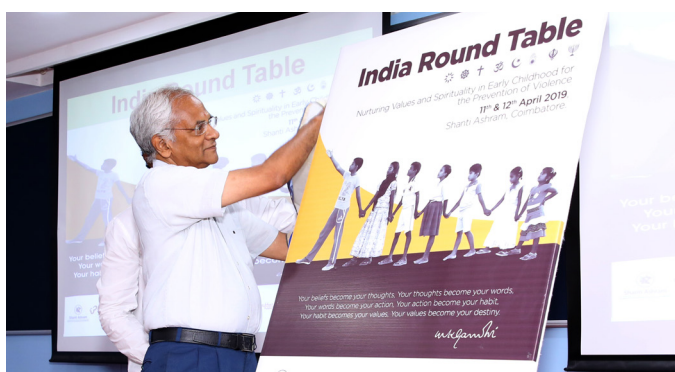




# PLENARY SESSION AT AVINASHILINGAM UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN

## Opening Remarks

Shri Kesav Desiraju, Trustee of Shanti Ashram and Former Secretary of the Health Union of the Government of India



Shri Kesav Desiraju underscored the importance of focusing on all stages of a child's life, from infancy to teenage years. He noted that India has done much in the last 20 years to reduce infant mortality. For example, India now only has 39 infant deaths for every thousand newborn births. Even though this number has decreased in the last decades, Shri Kesav Desiraju stated that more could be done to continue reducing this statistic. Additionally, he emphasised the importance of increasing the quality of life for both mothers and children through every subsequent stage of development, childhood and teenage years. Shri Kesav Desiraju said that neglect in any of those vital years could result in problems for the child later in life. For example, he said, "[We] need to remember the context in which a child is growing up, in which a young adult will reach adulthood, and to understand why that young person is prone to violence, prone to falling into the trap of bigotry and prejudice... because that is the result of 18 years of neglect".

In order to reduce maladaptive behaviours in the future, emphasis should be placed on the holistic care of a child's education, physical wellness, and nutrition. One way that Shri Kesav Desiraju proposed improving the educational aspect of a child's development is by having good school teachers. He stated, "An unhealthy child that receives an indifferent, substandard education will become an unemployable, malcontent adult... this is a ripe candidate for indulging in violent behaviours". With this in mind, Shri Kesav Desiraju urged those present to work together to improve all areas of a child's life, such as inadequate medical attention, improper nutritional care, and substandard primary education. Shri Kesav Desiraju emphasised that holistic care during all stages of a child's life will result in a healthy and productive adult.

## Violence against Children in India and How to Challenge Social and Cultural Norms

Dr Devashish Dutta, Global Public Health Expert

Dr Devashish Dutta began his presentation by looking at the demographics of children in India. The first graph he showed illustrated that 40% of India's population is comprised of children. The second graph showed that of that 40% of children, the majority of them are boys. When Dr Devashish Dutta asked the audience to identify if there was violence presented in the graphs, the audience was quick to note gender biases, patriarchal beliefs, and female



infanticide as reasons for the disproportionate male to female ratio in India.

Dr Devashish Dutta noted that there are various forms of violence. Some examples of child violence include physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and even neglect by their parents or caregiver. Additionally, some overarching examples of societal violence include discrimination due to gender, race, and religious beliefs. With this in mind, Dr Devashish Dutta noted that children who witness and experience violence are more likely to have complications and to continue these practices as adults. He said that violence creates children with “delayed milestones reflected in poor development, depression, apathy, anxiety, suicide, declined learning and academic performance, antisocial behaviours (drug use, high-risk behaviours)”. Dr Devashish Dutta emphasised the responsibility of everyone to challenge and prevent normalised violence against children.

Moreover, because it is more costly to treat than to prevent these negative side effects, Dr Devashish Dutta proposed that society should prioritise the prevention of violence in early childhood. He emphasised that the responsibility for children’s safety is an issue that concerns families, school staff and communities, and governments. Some solutions

he proposed to prevent child violence included educating adults on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which promotes non-discrimination towards children, which is a common type of violence against children and protects children’s lives and personal views. Dr Dutta also suggested practising positive disciplining, which reminds adults to be mindful of their stress and frustrations before reacting to children’s behaviours. Positive discipline also asks parents to observe and understand why the child is acting out in the first place.

Lastly, he presented good practices by the Inuit community in North America, a society that views violence such as hitting, spanking, and scolding children as socially wrong. Instead, the Inuit community uses cultural and religious stories to teach children moral lessons. He mentioned good practices from the Inuit community to illustrate a concrete example of a culture that sees child violence as undesirable, modelling a way for other societies to follow and prevent violence in early childhood.

## Introduction to Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood

**Ms Maria Lucia Uribe, Director Arigatou International Geneva**

Ms Maria Lucia Uribe explained that 80% of a child’s brain develops in the first three years. Early childhood is critical for children’s full development as this is when children start forming habits, building relations with others, when emotional ties are built, and when the bonds created with their parents and caregivers influence their healthy and sound start to life. The flourishing of the child is not only the task of the parents and caregivers but

also of all those who interact with children. The child's environment consists of the home, schools, religious communities, policies in place, and the broader community as a whole. These environments will influence their holistic development: physical, intellectual, language, social, emotional, and spiritual.

The spiritual nurturing of the child is critical for their full development; it helps them



develop values of empathy, respect for others, responsibility, caring, compassion, non-violence and resilience. Children's spiritual nourishing enables them to learn to relate to themselves, others and to the Divine. It also allows them to develop a sense of wonder, belonging and sense of purpose and meaning, which is critical for the positive development of their identities. This, in turn, can help them develop interconnectedness with others and discover that their existence depends on others. However, violence against children affects their full development and breaks their trust in other people. Ms Uribe emphasised that there are social and cultural norms that condone and justify violence against children and that are often intertwined with our religious beliefs and practices. Religious leaders and communities play a critical role in challenging those social and cultural norms and strengthening those that help nurture positive

values and spirituality in the child. She called for collaborative, interfaith and multi-sectoral efforts to end violence in early childhood.

Ms Maria Lucia Uribe ended by saying, "Today is an invitation to engage in dialogue, to share your ideas and the work you are doing, to start challenging one another... to initiate a process of revolutionising how we see our relation with the child... to create a movement that makes nurturing spirituality and values part of early childhood development".

## Spirituality in Early Childhood in the Hindu Tradition

Swami Atmapriyananda, Vice Chancellor of Vivekananda University

Swami Atmapriyananda began his presentation by stating that early childhood in the Hindu tradition starts from the conception of the child in the mother's womb. As the child develops in the womb, the mother nurtures the child consciously and unconsciously, through her nutrition and emotions. Swami Atmapriyananda underlined the importance of correctly nurturing both girls and boys because, with proper physical and spiritual development, the child can one day become a great leader.





Additionally, he emphasised the importance of memorisation in the Hindu tradition, which enables children to be inculcated with values that will not be easily forgotten later in life. For example, Swami Atmapriyananda said, “Adults should give [children] high ideas and noble thoughts... Noble ideas exist in all the religions [and] religious texts”. He reasoned that even though children might not understand those thoughts now, they will be guided by those ideas later in life. One of the religious mantras that every child should remember is, “Everyone is unique... only compete with yourself”. With this in mind, parents should not create environments of competition with other children, because this creates turmoil and stress on the child. Instead, parents should encourage their children to be their best selves.

Another lesson that Swami Atmapriyananda shared with participants was that all children should learn the power of concentration. According to him, the ability to concentrate enables the child to obtain higher ideas. Therefore, with noble ideas from the parents, the power of concentration, and great purity, a child will be adequately equipped for life.

Lastly, Swami Atmapriyananda said, “Our society is suffering from impatience and intolerance”. Often parents come home and forget to spend time with their children. The neglect is so great that children sometimes act out, and instead of nurturing the child, parents do the opposite and scold the child. Given this, parents should be attentive to the needs of their children and “appreciate every little thing a child does” in order to foster a loving environment at home.

## **The Value of “Reflecting, Learning and Working Together” in Addressing Violence against Children**

**Archbishop Felix Machado, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Vasai**

Archbishop Felix Machado spoke about the importance of learning, working, and living together as religious leaders, in order to address violence in early childhood. Archbishop Machado spoke about the role of the family, especially parents’ role in accompanying the child, as children best obtain a holistic education in the family. He noted that the decrease in values and extreme individualism and materialism have broken families and left single parents raising children. Specifically, he said that this decline in values “has made people believe that everything is possible and permissible”, but ultimately leaves people lonelier.



Moreover, he stated that today’s culture of instant solutions has negatively affected how marital problems are resolved. According to the Archbishop, “Marital problems are often confronted with haste... [without the desire] to make sacrifices and forgive one another”. He also noted that in today’s society, migration of

families is a new reality and can be an enriching experience for all; however, circumstances in a new country and extreme poverty often cause families to sell their children in exchange for money. Other negative issues affecting families today are drugs, gambling, and other addictions. Archbishop Machado argues that families should be the place where these negative factors can be prevented, but politics forget that at-risk families lose the ability to take care of their members, and the disastrous effect of these negative influences from society is the breakdown of the family. Because of this, Archbishop Machado reaffirms the need for society to revitalise the social support for healthy and stable families.

After analysing the current state of families today, Archbishop Machado moved to his second point of interreligious collaboration as a blessing, which can influence children to become good citizens of the world. Specifically, he said parents should see that “all religions are rich in teaching values” and “words and... examples from all can exert positive influences on children in a given community”. He also noted, “Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to today”, stressing that it is the responsibility of both religious groups and families to create healthier environments for children. Archbishop Machado also said, “It is important and essential to prevent early childhood violence, by lovingly correcting children and treating them with respect”. He reasoned, “If children know that they are cared for, then corrections become easier”. According to him, this method of educating children with spirituality and nurturance in the home and the community will enable them to become good citizens of the world.

## How to Nurture Spirituality and Education in Children through Music

Mr Anil Srinivasan, Director of the Rhapsody Music Organization in India

From his experiences of working with children, Mr Srinivasan first advised adults to listen to children. He suggested participants should stop using language that puts children in an “us” versus “them” mentality. He believes that if adults treat children as equals, by talking to them with respect and looking at them in the eyes, then the child’s dignity will be nourished and they will learn better. He also pointed out that adults should work with children and use more visual and oral methods to teach them. Having taught many children to play the piano, Mr Anil Srinivasan has seen children struggle to explain themselves verbally but excel at drawing. He said, “The more you use visual, the more you use audio, the more you will bring children’s spirit alive”. He encouraged the audience to speak with vivid vocabulary to spark children’s imagination.

Mr Srinivasan also encouraged adults to teach lessons in a way that invoke joy. He said that adults and educators should leave their problems



at home. This is important because children are observant learners, and in observing unhappy and frustrated adults, they will follow such behaviour. He ended by proposing that those present adopt the acronym “D.A.R.E.”, which stands for Dream, Act, Reflect, and Explore. He noted that children should be empowered by community leaders and parents to dream, play and act, reflect with adults on their ideas and

explore the world openly and curiously. Finally, Mr Anil Srinivasan added that parents often worry about their children being influenced by different religions. Parents do not like when the stimulus comes from different religious stories and practices. Art, he noted, is actually interfaith by definition, as it does not have religious and cultural boundaries.

## DAY TWO: 12 APRIL

### Preventing Violence and Nurturing Spirituality in Children from a Philosophical Perspective

Dr Priya M. Vaidhya, Assistant Professor at the Department of Philosophy at Mumbai University

Dr Priya M. Vaidhya reflects on ways in which Indian philosophy addresses violence in early childhood. Dr Vaidhya attempted to locate violence in the child through Indian philosophy from all levels: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Dr Vaidhya has seen that one method to address the child’s inner enemies is by focusing on the theory of Purusarthas that emphasises, “The more positive examples you give to the child, the lesser possibility of the child indulging in any kind of violence”. In other words, good role modelling enables the child to have something to follow and reduces violence at the emotional and social level.

Dr Vaidhya shares that often a child’s Dharma, or moral values, is not nurtured, causing violence to settle in. Parents should focus on instilling Dharma into their children. Dr

Vaidhya underlined parents and teachers’ responsibility to nurture children with proper T.V. shows and games that teach harmony and collaboration and discourage activities that promote violence, shooting, and competition.

Dr Priya M. Vaidhya spoke about the principles of yoga, which carries the concept of external and internal hygiene. Adults should teach children the correct values and spend time with them to assess their internal hygiene.

Dr Priya M. Vaidhya encouraged adults to filter films that teach negativity and play new games that nurture Ahimsa or non-violence. Some examples include building a human pyramid, which teaches children to learn to work together, counting the number of times that a child says thank you in a day, which teaches gratitude and playing a game that asks children in a circle to call out virtues in other people. Other examples involve asking children to think of solutions to problems around them, which enables adults to enter the world and mind of the child and learn how they feel, and hugging themselves, which teaches children about self-love. She stressed the importance



of art in nurturing the spirituality of children and their joy. She finished by inviting all participants to think of creating a curriculum of peace and non-violence to be implemented in schools.



### Questions and Answers

Participants asked several questions to Dr Vaidya regarding supporting children who have experienced trauma and violence, how to reduce self-stigma in children, as well as issues regarding children's freedom.

Dr Priya M. Vaidya mentioned that different interventions need to be catered to children who have been affected by violence, as specialised socio-emotional support is needed. She also underlined that when children are victims of stigmatisation, it is essential to provide them with opportunities to strengthen their view of themselves, enjoy and have fun while playing, as means to reduce charged and negative emotions. She also noted that children are born free and that even when people attempt to curtail their freedom of exploring the world and of asking questions, they find their own ways to attain that freedom. Moreover, parents play a critical role in teaching children to be responsible with their freedom. Parents should be guides, helping the child use their freedom to make the best and life-enriching decisions.

## Importance of Holistic Health in Early Childhood and the Impact of Violence against Children as Seen by the Neuro-Developmental Evidence

Dr Lakshmi Shanti, Member of the Indian Academy of Pediatrics

Dr Lakshmi Shanti stated that a "healthy child" is someone that not only lives a life without illnesses but also has, to name a few, their emotional, educational, and physical needs met. Dr Lakshmi Shanti stressed the importance of holistic health, especially since a lack thereof may jeopardise the cerebral development of a child. Specifically, a child is born into this world with all organs developed, except the brain. Dr Lakshmi Shanti highlights that the brain continues to grow after a child is born, creating new synapses or connections in the brain. For example, she noted, "After the baby is born, it is the various experiences that a baby goes through that shape the brain or causes the brain to mature". She also stated, "The experiences we give to the child or what the child undergoes is very important in shaping the child as a better human being". She emphasised the importance of experiences because a child's brain creates new synapses or connections with every new stimulus it is presented with. And if a child



does not, for example, develop connections to playing or learning to talk, they could be behind in their development.

Further, the constant stimulus is also important. Dr Lakshmi Shanti noted that after creating many synapses in the brain, the brain then begins a pruning process to refine the synaptic connections. In this process, Dr Lakshmi Shanti stated, “Connections used regularly become stronger and more complex whereas those not used are shed off”. Some examples of pruning include acquisition of the mother tongue or language development.

Dr Lakshmi Shanti explained that according to Psychology, all children have key experiences they need to meet at certain stages in their life called critical periods, in order to grow correctly. Missing a crucial period of, for example, not properly attaching to their mother, negatively impacts the development of a child, resulting in increased abuse and negative behaviours later in life. She also talked about how children who go through violence have higher levels of cortisol in their bodies. Cortisol negatively alters the electrical pathways of the brain, resulting in higher levels of theta waves and lower levels of alpha and beta waves. This is crucial because the results of an altered electrical pathway are deficient cortical development, which causes abused children to develop profiles similar to children with ADHD.

Abused children also show changes in response to internal/external stimuli, meaning abused children show larger deflections to angry target faces than non-abused children. In view of this, the audience was able to see why non-violence in early childhood is so important since it prevents subpar development in the child

to adulthood. Additionally, Dr Lakshmi Shanti stressed that these changes can be reversed if children are placed in a positive and nurturing environment. For example, Dr Lakshmi Shanti talked about the Bucharest Early Intervention project. She explained that the project followed two sample groups of homeless children from zero to 12-years-old who were placed in different facilities. One group was placed in high-quality foster care and the rest in institutionalized care. She said, “Follow-up assessment of these children revealed that foster care, meaning a very supportive care, enhanced the child’s development on all domains... whereas institutional care caused some profound deficit in all these domains”. Dr Lakshmi Shanti concluded, “Even though the child is abused or abandoned or neglected, the earlier we put the child into a better supportive care, [the earlier] we can reverse the changes... for a better neurological outcome in the child”.

## **PANEL DISCUSSION: THE CRITICAL NEED TO END VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD**

**Moderator: Dr Christopher S. Baskeran**

**Ms Maria Lucia Uribe: What are the strategies used nationally and globally to end violence against children?**

Ms Maria Lucia Uribe first classified the types of violence into cultural violence, direct violence, and structural violence. Direct violence is physical and verbal, and easily identifiable. Structural violence refers to injustices, discrimination, as well as the lack of access to public services to certain groups. Cultural violence refers to the justification of structural violence.

Some examples of cultural violence refer to conditioning, indoctrinating, and threatening children to believe what we want them to believe without creating spaces for them to think critically. Ms Uribe noted that adults often foster cultural violence without even realizing it.



Ms Uribe presented INSPIRE – Seven Strategies to End Violence against Children – which was developed by ten global agencies, including UNICEF and the World Health Organization. These strategies have proved successful in reducing and addressing violence against children. “I” stands for implementation of laws; “N” stands for norms and values in society that need to be challenged; “S” stands for creating safe environments for children; “P” stands for parental and caregiver support to help parents know alternatives to disciplining children; “I” stands for income and economic strengthening; “R” stands for response and support services; and finally, “E” stands for education and life skills.

Ms Uribe explained several examples to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence, support parents and caregivers, as well as foster education and life skills. Ms Uribe emphasised that campaigns that help promote positive norms are more successful than those that are focused on presenting

facts about violence. She also emphasised that religious leaders play a critical role in helping challenge social and cultural norms that justify violence. Ms Uribe cited the example of a spiritual radio show host in Cambodia by a Buddhist monk; after attending a workshop on ending violence against children, he started to introduce reflections for parents and caregivers to use positive discipline. His message reached many families in the community who reported that they began to use alternative methods to violent discipline.

Another strategy that Ms Uribe recommended to end violence in early childhood is to organize dialogues with men and boys. Ms Uribe highlighted Shanti Ashram’s “Dialogue with boys”, as an example to follow to reflect on gender equality, discuss normalisation of violence and transform the way men get involved in the upbringing of the child. Finally, Ms Uribe highlighted the importance of bystander intervention as a means of society coming together to discourage acts of violence against children. Ms Uribe ended by saying, “These are some of the strategies that work; I think you are doing several of these things... and we have to see what can be multiplied” in order to end violence against children in India.

**Dr Priya M. Vaidhya: One of the things that Dr Shanti said about early childhood development was the importance of attachment, but in the Indian philosophical traditions, we are taught not to be attached to things of this world. So how do you reconcile this?**

Dr Priya answered by first quoting Sri Rama Krishna, who said, “Love the child but do not get attached... The boat should be on the water, but not the water in the boat... because it can sink”. She used this quote to make the



point that parents should love the child but not get attached. She continued by saying that a good parent is one that lets their child grow independently and have the skills necessary to live in this world. "In Indian philosophy", she said, "we have this detachment dimension philosophy, where we define detachment not as indifference, but selflessly doing something for the other without expecting anything in return". She ended by saying, "A good example of detachment is God, who gives us all we have" in order to stress that we can all follow and practice this concept of detachment, to better raise children.

### Dr Devashish Dutta: How is violence against children seen in India?

Dr Devashish Dutta said that India has many laws to protect children, but the reality is that those laws are ignored. Dr Dutta explained that violence against children has been normalised. For example, he stated that hitting children in schools is forbidden, but it is not enforced due to the normalisation of violence against children in India. To further his point, he noted that these laws appear on the website of the Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Ministry of Women and Child (MWCD) but unfortunately are not being enforced. Some solutions he gave were to educate people on these laws and their responsibilities and to mobilize people to act upon them.

### Questions and Answers:

- When is the best time to teach children about interfaith? Dr Priya replied by saying that instead of looking at it as a particular age, one should start it as a self-exposure and allowing children to experience it through religious celebrations and games.

- How do we transform schools as spaces of learning, specifically places of learning that emphasise the principles of INSPIRE? Ms Uribe shared that one of the strategies of INSPIRE is "Education and Life Skills", which emphasises providing opportunities for children to learn skills but also attitudes and values, allowing them to also develop spiritually. She shared that schools should also be spaces where children learn to be in silence, dialogue and learn to solve their differences.
- In India, children who are part of the lowest castes are critically affected as they are discriminated against and excluded. What do you suggest to do to address this issue that clearly affects equality in early childhood? Dr Devashish Dutta said that we might need another social revolution to address this shameful issue. Ms Uribe added that we need to be critically conscious about our own privileges and how we can change that dynamic to empower those most marginalised, as it is not only an issue of those affected. Instead, for change to take place, those who are privileged need to be involved and become conscious about the structures that perpetuate violence.
- TV, cell phones and gadgets have taken over childhood. How do we prevent children from having access to these things? Dr Priya replied by saying, "If as parents we gave more quality time to children, then gadgets would not be an issue with children". "The secret", she said, "is to find time". Ms Uribe added that from personal experience, one should avoid forbidding things but rather give children options and alternatives. Parents should also provide children with quality time. Lastly, Dr Dutta concluded by saying that the use of gadgets is like pacifiers. Parents rely on technology for entertainment, rather than going out and spending time with their children.

## Dr S. Kowsalya, Registrar and Professor of the Department of Food Science and Nutrition

Dr S. Kowsalya focused on the work that the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) does to support children and women. The ICDS is a government initiative to help give children under six-years-old holistic health, such as education and nutrition. Additionally, this is a programme that provides holistic health to pregnant and lactating mothers, not just children. According to Dr S. Kowsalya, its mission is to reduce infant mortality, child malnutrition, and improve the capacity of mothers to take care of their children, in order to enhance their development. ICDS also provides immunisations and health check-ups for children. At their facilities, they provide medical attention and supplementary nutrition. ICDS also teaches its patients the importance of cooking, gardening, anaemia control, and the supplementation of Vitamin A and other nutrients.

Dr S. Kowsalya also noted that ICDS has found that “65-70% of pre-school children are anaemic, as well as 70% of pregnant and lactating women are anaemic, in spite of the very vast program India has”. ICDS referral services have helped improve the livelihood of children and mothers who are anaemic. Dr S. Kowsalya also noted future projects of ICDS. One of those projects



is to provide spaces that foster greater brain stimulation to children, as a means of nurturing them intellectually. Some of these activities include memorisation, logical reasoning, and language development. Finally, she noted that ICDS saw significant improvement in anaemic levels in their target population after building community gardens in different parts of India. Dr S Kowsalya ended by saying that the purpose of ICDS with the community gardens was to enable individuals to obtain their necessary intake of vegetables without any conflict of interest.

## PANEL DISCUSSION: RESOURCES AVAILABLE IN INDIA TODAY TO ADDRESS AND REVERSE VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

**Moderator: Ms Eleonora Mura, Arigatou International**

**Ms Basanthi Biswas, Representative of National Council Churches in India: How have you helped incorporate values of spirituality in the early childhood program at school, and how involved are families and other stakeholders?**

Ms Basanthi Biswas gave four examples of how she has nurtured spirituality and education to end child violence in school. She shared that





students in her school have access to a chapel in the morning, enabling them to pray and reflect on what has happened in their lives. Although her organization is Christian, she tries to have the conversation on how one must help and respect everyone in society in the chapel. As part of the work she is doing to protect children from violence, her school has also implemented a Child Safeguarding Policy, outlining the rights of children according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The school has made all teachers and staff sign it, and even school vendors in the local area. This shows that her school gives the highest consideration for the protection of children. Ms Basanthi Biswas also shared that her school has an instruction manual that teaches kids about sexuality, and about appropriate and inappropriate touches. She also invites parents to join the discussions at school.

**Mr Amir Abidi, Founder and Director of Tarraqi L Foundation: Do you have any concrete examples of how we can move together against child violence?**

Mr Abidi started the session with a video presentation of the snapshot of the work and progress of the foundation. He focused on three aspects: child central, experiential, and cost-effective. His foundation believes in hands-

on activities followed by deep introspection. Mr Abidi emphasised the need for students to learn about multiple intelligences in order to learn more about themselves and others. He noted, "When we are talking about the child, knowing the child is important... and also knowing yourself". Through his personal anecdotes, he noted the importance of dialogue. He shared that people often approach him and ask him questions that stereotype his Islamic identity. He underlined that it is important not to assume what another believes, simply by their appearance and demeanour. He concluded by saying that we need to have spaces where teachers and youth work together to talk and try to understand each other's differences.



**Dr Radha M. Parikh: Non-violence against Children According to the Bahá'í Faith**

Dr Radha began by sharing statistics about violence against children in India. She mentioned that of the 50,000 children that report leaving their homes each year, 45,000 are between the ages of six and 12. Additionally, children leave their homes due to poverty and complex family situations, such as abuse. To survive, Dr Radha notes that they sell snacks and drinks at road signals to survive. Oftentimes, they suffer abuse from society, like the police. She reaffirms the



negative consequences of abuse on early childhood and how that manifests into slower development later in life.

Dr Radha shared that the Bahá'í faith believes God is one, that all prophets come from God, and that all religions are from God. Dr Radha noted that this oneness should make everyone work together to bring about the common good in the world. Furthermore, Dr Radha stressed the Bahá'í faith egalitarian views of men and women. For example, she stated that the Bahá'í principle of equality between men and women enabled Iranian Bahá'í to achieve 100% literacy among women followers under the age of 40 by 1973, in contrast to the national literacy rate among women of less than 20% at the time. Another important component of the Bahá'í faith is its unification of science and religion. Dr Radha underlined, "The harmony of science and religion is one of the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í faith, which teaches that religion without science, soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes merely the instrument of crude materialism".



Dr Radha also presented the many social and economic projects of the Bahá'í faith. She highlighted that the Bahá'í faith has schools for children and adults based on these principles of oneness, gender equality, and spirituality. For example, a member of the Bahá'í faith established a Parent University in 2000 that trains parents in low-income neighbourhoods in Savannah to take greater ownership of the education of their children. Furthermore, the Bahá'í faith encourages children and youth to participate in community service activities, such as road clean-ups and raising awareness about illness prevention.



## GROUP DISCUSSIONS



Participants shared that some of the challenges families and caregivers face to nurture values and spirituality in the early years is the lack of knowledge of positive parenting and alternatives to violent discipline. They also underlined the importance of fostering learning about values and interfaith dialogue and understanding in schools, by creating spaces to celebrate diversity, pray for one another and learn from the different religious beliefs.

Participants discussed issues regarding corporal punishment and gender bias, as normalised in society. They also discussed the use of technology with young children and how it affects their development, particularly when exposed to violent programmes.

Participants recommended the following:

1. Organize roundtable discussions or fora in schools about the Convention on the Rights of the Child involving all school staff.
2. Create child protection policies in all schools.
3. Enforce policies/laws that protect children.
4. Organize festivals that celebrate all religions and allow children to be exposed and participate.
5. Work with religious leaders to establish support systems to protect children from violence.
6. Learn emotional intelligence in schools to learn to label feelings and manage them.
7. Encourage parents and caregivers to talk and listen to their children; create time to talk about the day and become role models.
8. Help children learn about good touch and bad touch and to accept themselves.
9. Use stories from religious scriptures to nurture values.
10. Encourage religious leaders to become advocates and influence families on the importance of nurturing values and spirituality in children.





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## ABOUT

### 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 practices 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.

### 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. They are: 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/)