

Ushering Social Change through dialogue with boys!



Science & ethics informed conversations between parents and children as part of the Intergenerational Dialogue with Boys initiative @ Shanti Ashram¹

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It's a hot day in Coimbatore, the largest district in South India's most populous state, Tamil Nadu. The district is famous for being a cotton and textile hub and plays host to a large labour community. The location is a typical government secondary school with the muted buzz common to all schools even during classes. The only difference is that seated on the rows of metal benches are not children in wilting uniforms but rather anxious looking parents.

Selvi*, a casual labourer and mother to a teenager, is worried about her son. Her concern and anxiety drips from every word as she shares her son's obsession with video games, the long hours spent with the phone in his hand, sacrificing study and sleep, and the incidents of theft and pilfering he had indulged in to support his interest. Selvi is not alone in her worries. In a recent interaction ICPH held with the parents of adolescent boys, every parent shared concern about mobile phone addiction, lack of interest in studies and engaging with family and unhealthy personal habits regarding diet and sleep. All of them wished that their children would just talk to them and explain what was wrong, what they needed to be happy and healthy. The COVID 19

Pandemic has further compounded the mental health status of millions of children worldwide. Prolonged pandemic precipitated school closures and the accelerated introduction to the digital world further has fuelled screen addition among children. Data & evidence demonstrates this clearly.

“Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims, as children’s lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways.

All children, of all ages, and in all countries, are being affected, in particular by the socio-economic impacts and, in some cases, by mitigation measures that may inadvertently do more harm than good.” UNICEF

Things were markedly different in the children’s perspective. They complained about the stress of constantly being compared to others and the constant pressure to perform well, equating it as akin to mental violence and expressed their need to get relief from that. In their opinion, they were open to conversation and amenable to change, if only parents and other adults in their life could speak to them in a manner they could relate to.



Science Informed Dialogue:It was to bridge this divide that the International Center for Child and Public Health (ICPH) invited the Indian Academy of Paediatrics to be part of the Dialogue. ICPH engaged the services of Dr. Lakshmi Shanthi, a leading Paediatrician. In a long and interactive discussion, she managed to allay many fears of the gathered parents.



She spoke about how the circadian rhythms of children change as they enter into adolescence and how it was physiologically impossible for teenagers to follow the same sleep schedule they did when they were children. She shared that as long as children got between 7 and 8 hours of sleep, they would be fine. She addressed herself to the children when she spoke about the need for a healthy diet, the importance of breakfast and the many changes happening in their bodies which required the right fuel for proper execution. She also shared how mobile phone addiction was recognized as an actual mental health problem today and how certain youngsters might need systematic medical support and intervention to get better. ‘Screen addiction’ is a recognized medical addiction today and treatment protocols are being developed.

Children said, ‘In their opinion, they were open to conversation and amenable to change, if only parents and other adults in their life could speak to them in a manner they could relate to’.

Once the conversational ball started rolling, the youngsters were asked about what they liked best in their own parents and what their expectations from them were. They were quite vocal about their need for positive affirmation and appreciation, their need to not be blamed and branded for their failures and their wish that parents would see them as adults and have more friendly conversations with them rather than always just advising them. One youngster spoke about how parents generalized every incident making encompassing statements such as “you are always doing this” while another shared his deep embarrassment at being berated in public. Another young boy spoke about how they are often aware that they have done something wrong and feel guilty about it and how being scolded and beaten by their parents reinforced that hurt while in actuality what they are hoping for is understanding and forgiveness.

The adolescent brain is a work in progress. The pre frontal cortex, which controls actions such as reason, long-range planning and impulse control, is fully developed only by the age 25. Coupled with the stress of developing an individual identity as well as other external stressors, this translates into adolescents being more likely to exhibit high risk, violent and self harming behavior.

Adolescents who have themselves have been subject to abuse are much more likely to turn to violence themselves¹, with studies showing that each additional adverse experience increases the risk of becoming a serious, violent, and chronic juvenile offender by a factor of 35².

This cycle of trans-generational violence is a vicious one but there is hope. Research has shown that by showcasing positive social norms³, engaging in informed dialogue⁴ and developing a visible and collective stand against violence⁵, this cycle can be disrupted. This informed approach is followed by Shanti Ashram in its own initiatives.



¹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1745-9125.1989.tb01032.x>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0145213415000356?via%3Dihub>

³ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359440486_The_social_norms_approach_as_a_strategy_to_prevent_violence_perpetrated_by_men_and_boys_A_review_of_the_literature

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352800963_Boys_talk_on_gender_sexism_and_online_ethics_Shifting_the_line

⁵ <https://oxfamilibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/146189/er-we-can-south-asia-evaluation-051011-en.pdf?sequence=7>

Dr. Lakshmi continued her role as expert mediator giving helpful hints to parents on how to stage interventions with their children and emphasizing the importance of giving children time and space to grow. As the session drew to a close, there was a much warmer and informal vibe to the room than when we started, a sense of light and chatter indicating hope for better days to come.

These facilitated dialogues are a part of Shanti Ashram's programme, Intergenerational Dialogue with Boys, aimed at working with adolescent boys to raise awareness about human dignity and rights, especially gender equality and violence against women and girls. The programme has an intergenerational and inclusive approach, aiming to bring within its ambit not only the child but also all the circles of influence in his or her life - school, home and peer inhabited spaces. It has adopted a science informed Ethics Education Approach (developed by Arigatou International) and aims to place dialogue in its rightful milieu, amongst the stakeholders themselves.

Before the pandemic, as per UN, one in 3 women across the globe was already subject to some form of physical and sexual abuse. Post March 2020, which is when full scale lockdowns started in many countries, emerging data has shown an average of 30% increase in calls to abuse help lines⁶. A study focusing on 13 emerging economies⁷ highlighted that overall the pandemic has increased women's experience of violence and eroded their sense of security. In such a context, as children return to school, in all likelihood having seen emerging incidents of violence in their surroundings, we must act and with alacrity. Research has consistently shown that children who are victims of violence during their childhood are more likely to perpetrate the same in their adulthood and breaking this vicious cycle is essential if we are to dream of a more peaceful future.

Ushering Social Change through dialogue with boys Programmes such as 'Dialogue with Boys', places children at the front and center and provides

⁶<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Issue-brief-COVID-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-Infographic-en.pdf>

⁷<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/feature-story/2021/11/covid-19-and-violence-against-women-what-the-data-tells-us>

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opportunities for facilitated dialogue, creating safe spaces for sharing and breaking the culture of silence. It acts as a space not just for problem assessment but also solution development and with expert support aims to create impetus for behaviour modification and social change.

If the interaction with parents, where the boys also brought up concerns regarding gender stereotyping in their households, was any indication, we are on the right track and our one hope is that more organizations facilitate such open dialogue and interaction across the world!



*name changed to protect privacy

ⁱIntergeneration Dialogue with Boys to end violence against girls and women's in Rural South India initiative @ Shanti Ashram Website: www.icpphealth.org

In March 2018, 'Dialogue with Boys' was developed against the backdrop of growing violence against women and girls in India. The International Centre for Child and Public Health (ICPH), the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP) & Shanti Ashram, using an approach based on intergenerational dialogue and centered on the active participation of boys to challenge gender-based violence, started the 'Dialogue with BOYS'.

This programme, using an Ethics Education Approach developed by Arigatou International, empowers adolescent boys to challenge harmful norms in their communities that condone violence against women and girls, and motivates them to take action to transform these norms.

The programme is science informed. Experienced pediatricians educate and empower the boys with updated knowledge on adolescence, the physiology of growing up and the physical and the emotional changes that mark this critical period of development. The programme allows for a deep reflection on the root causes of inequality and violence. It aims at mobilizing boys to end gender-based violence in their families and within their communities.

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