

# INSPIREd Faith Communities:

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

SRI LANKA



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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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET ABOUT?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>WHY IS EARLY CHILDHOOD SO CRITICAL?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF VIOLENCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD?</b>	<b>10</b>
Types of Violence Against Children	11
Violence and its Impact on the Development of the Child's Brain	12
<b>VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>HOW CAN WE NURTURE OUR SPIRITUALITY FOR THE PREVENTION OF VIOLENCE?</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>INSPIRE-ING CHANGE: STRATEGIES FOR ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN</b>	<b>19</b>
Challenging Norms and Values that Condone Violence Against Children	21
Supporting Parents and Caregivers	29
Enhancing Education and Life Skills that Support the Creation of Safe and Inclusive School Environments	37
<b>BRING THE DIALOGUE INTO YOUR COMMUNITY</b>	<b>45</b>

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The International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence 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 different stakeholders to strengthen norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive, and gender-equitable relations that contribute to reducing parenting practises 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 Sri Lanka round table, which took place in Moratuwa, Sri Lanka on 18 February 2019.

On behalf of the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, 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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1 The round table discussions took place in Sri Lanka (February), India (April), Lebanon (May), Kenya (May), and Brazil (June).



## WHAT IS THIS BOOKLET ABOUT?

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

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

### Who is it for?

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

### What are the objectives of the booklet?



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



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



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



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

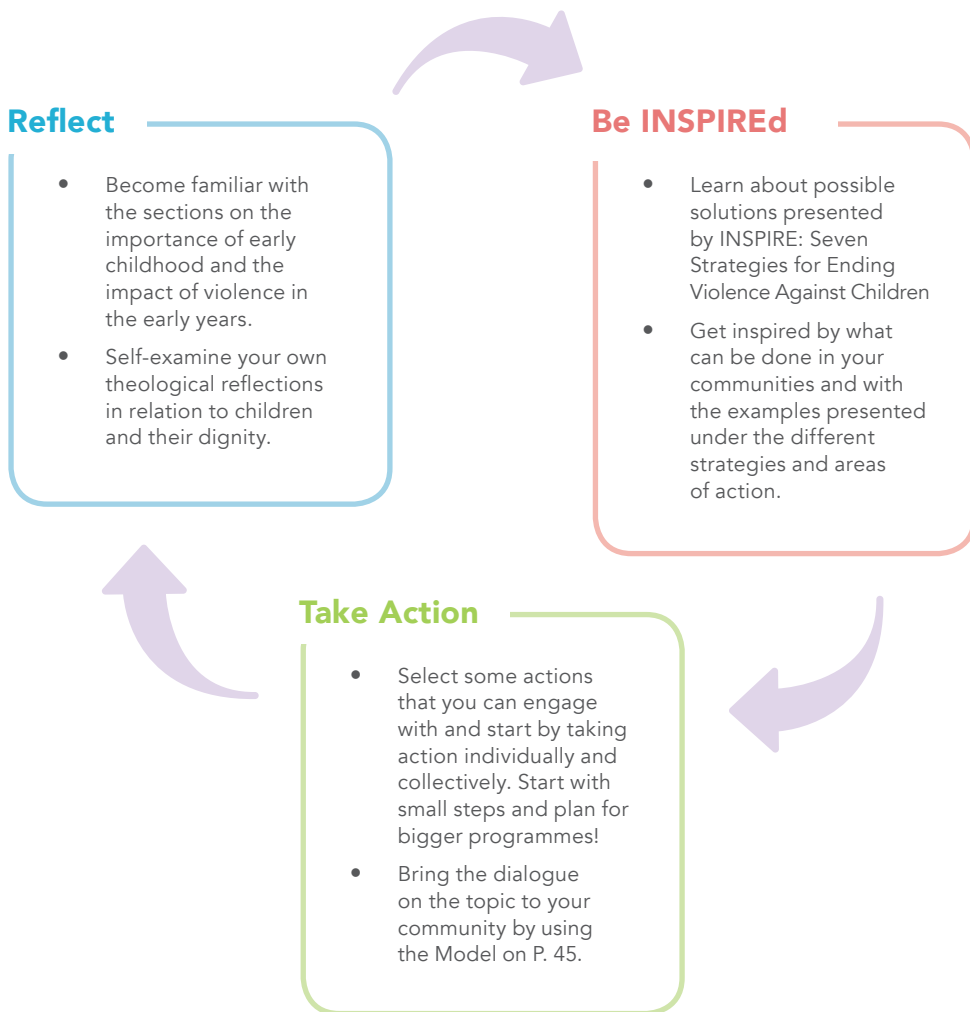


Start concrete actions to support parents, caregivers, and educators to raise children in nurturing and caring environments, free of violence.



## How can this booklet be used?

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



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

## WHY IS EARLY CHILDHOOD SO CRITICAL?

### Children are not only a gift but the delight and consolation in this world.

– Ash Sheikh SHM Faleel

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 practises, and immense care and love is given to nurture their spirituality. In the Hindu tradition, there are 16 samskaras or rites of passage to create a lasting impression on the minds of children. Out of these 16 samskaras, two are performed during the mother's pregnancy and eight are performed during early childhood. The purpose is to create a positive impact on the child, and to remind adults to acknowledge that the life of a child is something precious to take care of.

In 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>2</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>3</sup> Jesus also strongly urged his disciples not to discriminate children from receiving his blessings, and promoted their rightful inclusion into the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup> As a child, Jesus himself grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.<sup>5</sup> This is a pointer to the intellectual, physical, social, and spiritual well-being that is necessary for the holistic nurturing of all children.

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>6</sup>, an adornment of life (Zeenah)<sup>7</sup>, a great blessing

<sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version – Catholic Edition, Matthew 18:1.

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Bible, Matthew 18:3–4.

<sup>4</sup> The Holy Bible, Mark 10:13–16.

<sup>5</sup> The Holy Bible, Luke 2:52.

<sup>6</sup> The Qur'an 14:39.

<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an 18:46.



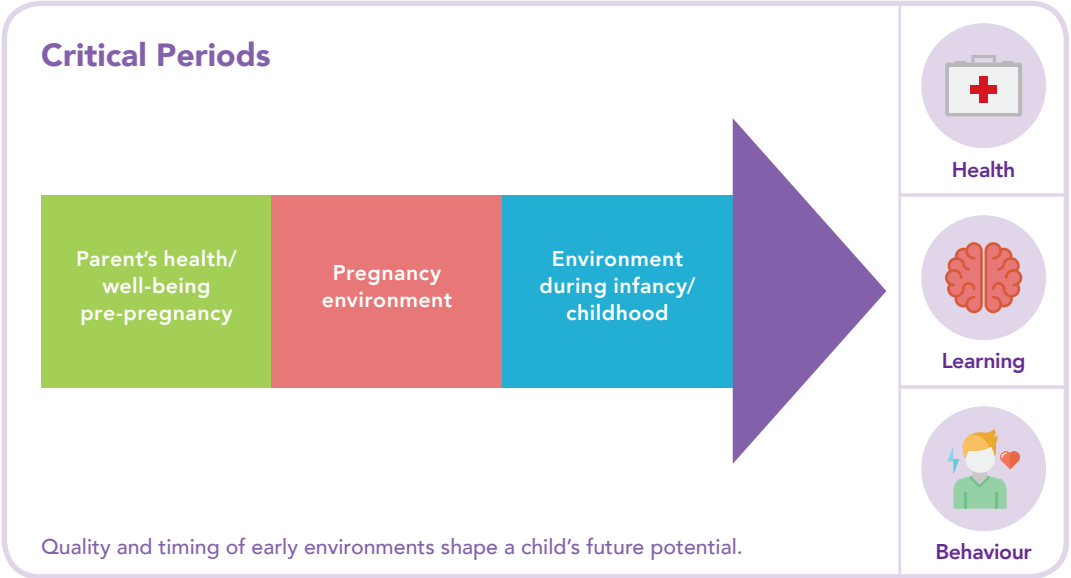
(Ni'imah)<sup>8</sup>, and is regarded as a protector or friend who carries legacy (Waleeh).<sup>9</sup> Through these powerful words, the Qur'an reminds us of how blessed we are to have children, it sets the minds of parents and other caregivers so that they see children as blessings and not as a burden.

In Buddhism, the concept of impermanence reminds us that young children are in a continuous state of change and that to love children is also to lose them as they grow up. Children, therefore, offer us the challenge of loving without attachment, as we allow them to discover a path in life that helps them to develop to their full potential and achieve happiness and fulfilment. This calls parents and caregivers to practise Dharma—or Buddhist teachings—in their child-upbringing practises, by upholding and supporting children and creating a loving environment for them to thrive. In this practise of Dharma, our children become teachers as

well, as Buddha's teachings are only transmitted in reciprocal relationships. To take care of a child, adults need to work on themselves to transform the qualities of their minds.

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

1. Pre-pregnancy, during which the health and well-being of the future parents influences 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.



8 The Qur'an 16:72.  
 9 The Qur'an 19:5-6.

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.

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



### My own reflections

## 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>10</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 in one's life or makes us aware of the Ultimate Reality. In our religious traditions, children are often described as a whole person, a very important member of our society, and as a gift. Science, at the same time, also shows that young children should be given special attention and care, and need positive and nurturing interactions. In their own ways, both science and our religious traditions point out the importance of early childhood. Yet, in silence, many children suffer different forms of violence inflicted upon them. 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 — and 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>11</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.

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.

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

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

# TYPES OF VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

## Physical violence

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

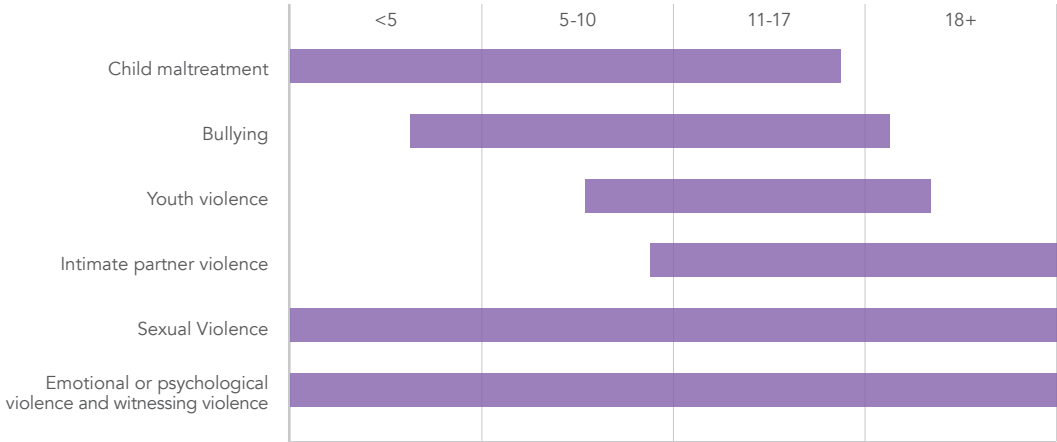
## Phychological violence

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

## Sexual violence

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

Figure 1 Type of violence by age group affected<sup>12</sup>



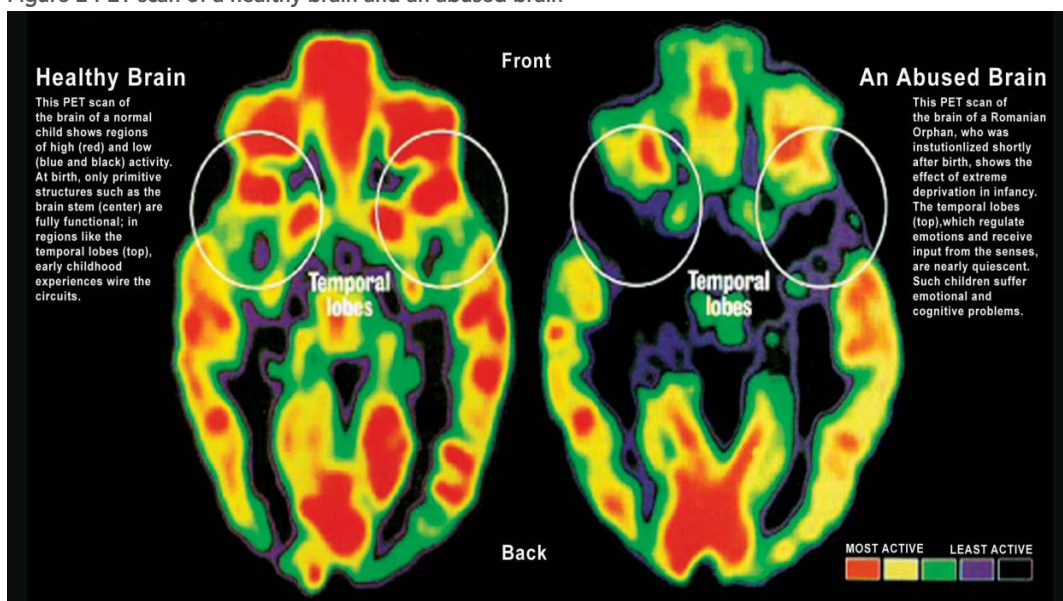
12 World Health Organization, *INSPIRE: Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*. Executive Summary, 2016, p. 4.

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

Experiencing violence in childhood often has effects throughout an individual's lifetime. Some studies show that children who suffer violence in childhood are more prone to mental illness such as anxiety and depression.<sup>13</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>14</sup>

Figure 2 PET scan of a healthy brain and an abused brain<sup>15</sup>



13 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.

14 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.

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

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>16</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

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



## VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN IN SRI LANKA

Children in Sri Lanka are not exempt from different forms of violence. According to the Know Violence in Childhood Report<sup>17</sup>—a worldwide study conducted in 2015—in Sri Lanka more than 73 per cent of children between the ages of one and 14 experience corporal punishment at home, perpetrated by parents and caregivers. The reported number of child abuse cases in Sri Lanka is on the rise, according to the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA).<sup>18</sup> Over 2,400 complaints of child cruelty were reported to the government agency in 2018, as compared to 905 in 2010. The types of violence reported range from verbal to physical abuse, oftentimes perpetrated by people children know and trust, including parents and caregivers.

Reflecting on the current situation—where violence as a form of punishment is normalized and widespread in schools, homes, and institutions across the country—many child protection stakeholders and religious leaders believe physical and humiliating punishment are critical issues that need urgent action.

Although domestic violence has been criminalized in Sri Lanka, violence against children remains a challenge. Violence in schools—which includes corporal punishment, sexual abuse, and peer-to-peer violence,



**73%** of children between the ages of **one and 14** experience corporal punishment at home, perpetrated by parents and caregivers.

including bullying—is also widespread and normalized and has not been addressed successfully by policies and programmes. At the end of 2017, there was a backlog of nearly 17,600 unresolved child abuse cases in the files of the Department of the Attorney General.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, all stakeholders, including families, caregivers, and members of the community, have a key role to play as guarantors of the rights of children.

Peer-to-peer violence, including bullying, is another form of violence against children that is normalized. Bullying is often not taken seriously as violence because adults think that ‘children are being children’ or that ‘this is just a phase’. Nurturing positive values, such as respect and empathy, in early childhood could prevent children from becoming perpetrators of violence against their peers. These values nurtured in early childhood will break the vicious cycle of violence that is passed down from one generation to another, where children become perpetrators of violence as adults when they grow up.

<sup>17</sup> Know Violence in Childhood, *Ending Violence in Childhood. Global Report 2017*, New Delhi, 2017, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> The Sunday Times, ‘Mother’s murder of child reveals dark trend of child cruelty’, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190217/news/mothers-murder-of-child-reveals-dark-trend-of-child-cruelty-336592.html>, accessed 11 Jul. 2019.

<sup>19</sup> According to the Attorney General’s annual performance report presented to Parliament in April 2019. The Sunday Times, ‘Child abuse: Backlog of 17,600 cases in AG’s Dept.’, <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/190414/news/child-abuse-backlog-of-17600-cases-in-ags-dept-345552.html>, accessed on 18 Apr. 2019.

Sri Lanka has experienced a long-term armed conflict and has had other cycles of violence. Because of this, communities are more vulnerable to violence becoming normalized and, consequently, passed down to generations through social narratives and practises.



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

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



As parents, caregivers, and all those who are part of the upbringing of the child, we first need to nurture and keep in touch with our own spirituality and capacity to deal with contradictions in our lives. By nurturing one's spirituality as a parent or caregiver, we are preparing ourselves to provide nurturing care to children, to respond in more positive manners to their needs, and to help create safe and respectful spaces for them to explore their interconnections with others.

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.

From the Hindu perspective, the purpose of nurturing spirituality is to grow a sense of right values as guiding principles and to avoid

misery and sorrow on ourselves, as well as those around us. In Hinduism, divine values such as non-violence, freedom, purity, love, non-covetousness, modesty, selflessness, etc., strengthen harmony and welfare. In contrast, values such as hatred, indifference, greed, anger, violence, arrogance, etc., breed violence and other evils. Hindu practises aim to strengthen these divine values. Hinduism teaches ahimsa ('non-injury or non-violence'), which is in the mind; sathyam ('truth'), which is the intellect; and brahmacharya ('control'), which controls physical senses. Children are divinely created to be seen as blessings and opportunities for parents to grow, both physically and spiritually. Religious teachings and stories guide us to be peaceful and in harmony in our relationship with other beings, including our children.

Our religious traditions remind us of values and notions that strengthen our understanding of the other. Practising religion and nurturing our

own spirituality mean that we are developing relationships, not only with ourselves or vertically with the Transcendent or with God, but also horizontally with peers within and outside of our immediate community. These horizontal relationships are also intergenerational. Through interactions with peers and elders, children learn how to be active participants and critical thinkers. 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.

Adults, too, learn from these intergenerational interactions. As in Christianity, Jesus said,

'Truly, I say to you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'<sup>21</sup> This passage reminds us to recognize that children already have a spirituality and that adults can learn from them. Children's spirituality is often hindered by the violence inflicted upon them by adults.

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>22</sup> Loving oneself is perhaps a prerequisite to love others. With these words Jesus shows a path towards unity and solidarity with others—a solidarity that requires and 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

**It is critical for children to learn about the notion of "I am because you are," which also relates to the understanding of Ubuntu.**

*– Venerable Galkande Dhammananda*

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Matthew 18:3.

<sup>22</sup> *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Mark 12:30-31.

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.<sup>23</sup>

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



## My own reflections

23 Sahih Bukhari Hadith No. 8 and Sahih Muslim Hadith No. 16.

## 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 Sri Lanka, religion plays a significant role in people's lives. This is true not only because of the high percentage of people practising religion, but also because religious and faith-based institutions provide a large portion of services, including healthcare and education. Religion is tightly connected to the daily lives of people in Sri Lanka 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 Sri

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

The 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>24</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>25</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.



Implementation and enforcement of laws



Norms and values



Safe environments



Parent and caregiver support



Income and economic strengthening



Response and support services



Education and life skills

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

24 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.

25 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



With over 98 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka adhering to Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity,<sup>26</sup> many practising on a daily basis, religious communities have a significant role to play in ending violence against children. Religious leaders can also lead the effort to challenge cultural and social norms that condone violence in early childhood. With their moral authority, religious leaders can foster values such as empathy, respect, and compassion based on religious narratives and teachings. They are also best positioned to support families in nurturing values and spirituality in children to develop a strong sense of identity that is inclusive.

When parents and caregivers use corporal punishment, they are sending a message to the child that it is okay to use violence and fear to express frustration, solve challenges, and change behaviours of others. Violence by adults towards children is often justified in the name of discipline. This is mostly because adults are not aware of the alternatives to violence, because they were victims of violent experiences during their own childhood, or because they are unable to nurture their own spirituality due to being pre-occupied with work and other responsibilities.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Census and Statistics of Sri Lanka, 'Population by religion according to districts, 2012', <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PopHouSat/CPH2011/index.php?fileName=pop43&gp=Activities&tpl=3>, accessed 11 Jul. 2019.





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

Some of the common reasons that are used to condone corporal punishment include: 'I was beaten as a child by my father, but I deserved it,' 'If a parent hits a child with love, it is okay,' or 'if children are not hit, they don't learn'. Parents, teachers or caregivers may also think that children should be obedient at all times and have no right to speak up against them. Therefore, disobedience is not tolerated and is punished in any way deemed appropriate, including corporal and other

humiliating punishment. These statements do not support the image of childhood that that stem from our religious traditions, which is signified by peace, love and care.

A collective reflection on the narrative of a peaceful and loving childhood that our religious traditions symbolize can make a difference. Through dialogue and reflection, social and cultural norms and behaviours that condone violence in our communities can be transformed. Bringing change to social norms and behaviours is not a sprint but a marathon. Having a safe space within the religious community for sharing, reflecting, and examining the norms we currently adhere to is helpful in this process. In time, more people will embrace beliefs that are favourable to attitudes that support non-violent and gender-equitable approaches to childcare.

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

 <p>Create safe spaces for dialogue in your community</p>	 <p>Make religious communities child-friendly places</p>
 <p>Transform norms through the interpretation of scriptures</p>	 <p>Raise awareness and join advocacy efforts at regional and national levels</p>



## Create safe spaces for dialogue in your community

Within our own religious community, we can create a safe space for discussion and dialogue on the topics of ending violence in early childhood and nurturing spirituality and ethical values. We can 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 in your community's activities and programmes:

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

Religious leaders can bring up issues of violence against children in their daily interactions with their communities, including religious activities, meetings, workshops, and sermons. They can also use social media and TV or radio to raise awareness about the impact of violence in children, and share narratives that challenge social norms condoning violence, using theological reflections that uphold the human dignity of children and the sacredness of their lives.

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.



### Keep in Mind BUILDING TRUST

When addressing social norms in Sri Lanka, we must take a moment to reflect on the country's history. Due to the experience of colonization, there is a legacy of fear and suspicion of 'the other' and 'the outsider'. The suspicion and distrust of 'the other' was reinforced even further and became the norm during the recent civil war, which lasted for 30 years and claimed the lives of thousands of people.

Religious leaders can play a significant role in developing counter-narratives for healing and rebuilding trust. To build trust among one another, adults need to heal themselves first and apologize for the wounds inflicted on each other in the name of religion. Seeing 'the other' through this lens opens the door for restorative, instead of retributive justice. This is an important step in building trust among different communities and transforming the norms that are based on suspicion and distrust.



## 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 your 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.



Keep in Mind

## DIALOGUE WITH CHILDREN

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

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

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

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



## Transform norms through the interpretation of scriptures

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 practises 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.

Within our own religious communities, leaders can take the initiative to draw from the essence of the religious teachings and sacred texts to emphasize the message of non-violence and support respectful parenting practises that are sensitive to the current contexts and challenges. Religious leaders can do so by providing interpretations of teachings that affirm the dignity of the child so that religious teachings are not misused to justify violence against children.

Self-examination of practises that condone violence against children can start as part of internal dialogues within our communities. It can also be supported by creating spaces for reflections and sharing on child protection and safeguarding among religious leaders from different faiths.

*There is a tendency to romanticize religion as a panacea for social injustice. Acknowledgement has to be made about historical and present-day violence inflicted within and with religions, including sexual exploitation of children. It is a fact that religious institutions and religious leaders are among the perpetrators of violence. Self-reflection by religious leaders will help modify this assumption and face the reality in front of us.*

– Rev Duleep de Chickera, former Bishop of the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka

 Get Inspired

## ULEMAS LEARN ABOUT CHILD PROTECTION ISSUES AS PART OF THEIR RELIGIOUS TRAINING

At Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, located in Beruwela (Kalutara District), leaders of religious communities in various parts of the country gather to further their studies.

At the Naleemiah Institute, as a part of their religious training, Ulemas (leaders/preachers of Islam) learn about child protection issues from a panel of experts consisting of Islamic leaders, psychologists, and doctors. Based on their studies, Ulemas are invited to put their learning into action by addressing prevention of violence against children and promotion of positive parenting in their Friday sermons. In doing so, they are also encouraged to work with doctors, psychologists, and others among their communities to share information on topics related to children's well-being. This is an example of how religious communities open their places of worship for information sharing and learning to support parents and caregivers.



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

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

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

- The importance of the early years in terms of brain and identity formation of the child (refer to p. 8).
- The long-lasting effects of violence in terms of negative health and development outcomes (refer to p. 12)
- The benefits of positive parenting (refer to p. 31).
- The importance of communication and space for dialogue between parents and children.
- The importance of involving fathers more in daily parenting and in dialogue with their children.

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

A few actions to advocate for:

- A few actions to advocate for:
- Ask your national government to invest more in early childhood and produce better data on violence against children.
  - Promote and encourage the use of the child helpline. The child helpline can be reached dialling 1929. The child helpline works 24 hours to report child abuse and provide support to victims.
  - Link up with other partners to build coalitions of individuals and organizational supporters. This might include advocating for legislation to protect children from child abuse and neglect, end gender based violence, child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation, and to end corporal punishment.



## My own reflections



## 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 practises 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 separation of children from families, 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 derive 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, 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.

Parents and caregivers nurture ethical behaviours of children in both explicit and implicit ways. From the time the child is a baby, parents explicitly and automatically tell the child to eat everything on their plate, share their toys, obey their parents, not to take other people's belongings, tell the truth, etc. On the other hand, implicit teaching is more complex and less overtly moral. It refers to how parents deal with disagreements, parents' relationships with their friends, with other family or community members, and with people of other faiths. It is also shaped

by the way parents answer questions, and the opinions they casually or repeatedly express about other people. Parents nurture their own ethical values through the ways they interact with their children. In contexts of domestic violence, studies show that it is likely to pass on to the next generation because children learn that violence is a way of dealing with problems. Most parents understand the importance of teaching explicit values, while they often underestimate the implicit ways they shape their children's development of ethical values and identity formation.

## **Good parenting is an uphill, but a possible task for which guidance is provided through scriptural wisdom.**

– Swami Gunatitananda

Our religious traditions emphasize the importance of the family. In Islam, family is recognized as a fundamental platform that supports the 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, 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.

The Hindu perspective on good parenting underlines that parents have to be living examples of the divine values since children pick up values and knowledge by imitating

their elders. Leading by example also includes treating children with love, kindness, care, and compassion. These will help create a space for mutual attention by both parents and the children based on love and devotion, leaving no room for violent means to discipline children. From the Hindu perspective, negative values such as selfishness, individualism, and arrogance pose challenges to good parenting.

In Buddhism, the role model of a child is Siddhartha, who achieved enlightenment later in life. The way he was nurtured as a child also allows a perspective into Buddhism’s model of child upbringing. In Siddhartha’s childhood, there is no violence. It is filled with love and care, which provides a model of how others ought to raise their children.

Actions to support parents and caregivers:



Encourage positive parenting



Promote alternative ways to discipline children



Strengthen the agency of the child



Stress the importance of role modelling



## Encourage positive parenting

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

This means that parents need to undergo a process of unlearning of their current habits, also in terms of re-thinking the happiness of the child, not only in terms of academic achievements and, later, career goals in life, but especially in terms of values, love, and compassion. This self-reflection by parents will also need to challenge the use of corporal punishment while looking at positive and nurturing parenting.

Programmes can be organized according to the following:

- Positive parenting courses that present and foster skills on non-violent alternatives for child upbringing, as well as positive nurturing of the child.
- Promoting wellness to encourage parents, both mother and father, to create a positive relationship with one another and their children.
- Guidance to reflect on and learn how to manage their anger and frustrations so they can be a better role model for children.

- Encouraging parents to spend quality time with one another and their children, build mutual respect, and recognize children as individuals in their own right.
- Information sharing about referral and reporting mechanisms on violence against children in your districts.



Keep in Mind

## WHAT IS POSITIVE PARENTING?

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

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

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

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



### Get Inspired

## HOLISTIC APPROACH TO PARENTHOOD

Vishva Nikethan, a branch of the Sarvodaya Shramadhana Movement, offers a programme for expecting parents. Based on a method developed by Dr Upali Marasinghe and through yoga and meditation, the programme invites expecting parents to practice loving-kindness (metta) towards their child, which encourages the holistic development of the child during pregnancy. The programme continues after birth with mindful parenting classes, where new parents learn about positive and non-violent parenting, introducing the child to the green and natural environment of Vishva Nikethan.

Similarly, the Awareness Programme takes place at the Hope Preschool and Early Childhood Development Centre, which has its roots in Buddhist teaching, in cooperation with the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA). The programme aims to train parents on positive parenting, including non-violent discipline, awareness-raising on issues related to child protection and child rights, and preventing violence against children in family settings. This is an example of a faith-affiliated institution working together with a government agency, opening their space, where there is already a sense of trust, to share information and accompany parents and caregivers through their learning process.





## Promote alternative ways to discipline children

The support of religious leaders to parents and caregivers is critical to foster the understanding and practise 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.

Violent-free parenting requires from 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 important to guide our children in expressing their feelings and emotions with words and to have a dialogue, rather than recurring to corporal or verbal abuse of the child.

Create spaces within your religious community to learn and reflect on the importance of early childhood and the scientific evidence on the impact of violence. Invite experts on early childhood to share information as well as good practises of positive parenting.

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 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.



### Get Inspired

The Sati Pasala Foundation's Mindfulness Programme, founded by the Most Venerable U. Dhammajiva, reports positive results in preventing and responding to violence. Practising mindfulness meditation with parents and communities across Sri Lanka, Sati Pasala's programme has proven effective in addressing social issues, including violence against children and peer-to-peer violence. Through practising mindfulness, parents are able to become more grounded and provide a calm presence for their children, reduce stress, and enhance non-judgmental awareness of thoughts towards their children. Practising mindfulness parenting also helps parents to be more aware of children's emotional needs and leads to a stronger recognition of the individuality of the child.



## Strengthen the agency of the child

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

– Luke 2:39-52

The topic of the agency of the child—how much space we give our children to grow, develop, and follow their aspirations from a young age—must be a central aspect of parenting. The above quote from the Bible shows a worried Mary. At the same time, the story shows a Mother that respects the choices of her child as she wisely and knowledgeably gave her child freedom. This exemplifies that it is important to give space to our children to express their views and be heard; and we need to listen to them and allow them to participate in making decisions that affect them, even during the early years. Young children are acutely sensitive to their surroundings and very rapidly acquire an 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>27</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 on which 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, and disrespectful encounter.

In Buddhism, children are viewed as a whole person and not an extension of parents. Their individuality is respected, which encourages parents 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*:

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



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

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

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

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

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,*

*For they have their own thoughts.*

*You may house their bodies but not their souls,*

*For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,*

*which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*

*You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.*

*For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.*

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

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

*and He bends you with His might that His arrows may go swift and far.*

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

*For even as He loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is stable.<sup>28</sup>*



## **Stress the importance of role modelling**

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.

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

From the Hindu perspective, negative values such as selfishness and arrogance pose challenge to good parenting. Parents need to be role models for their children, and they cannot model violence as a way to obtain respect.

One of the best ways to stop the cycle of violence is for parents to model non-violence and positive attitudes and values. Religious leaders can highlight the importance of role modelling during their sermons and their dialogues with parents.

<sup>28</sup> Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*. Arrow Books Ltd. (New York, 1991).

## What can parents and caregivers do?

- Practise the values they want to transmit to their children, showing to children 'the value of the values', 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 overall well-being.
- Model respect of people of different faiths and backgrounds by allowing children to mingle with those who do not practise their same religion.



## My own reflections

## 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 staff members. 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.

Schools need to become nurturing environments for children helping them to grow, develop, and thrive. Article 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right of every child to holistic development including 'physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.'

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 Sri Lanka 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 to support teachers in making schools safe and inclusive.

### Suggested actions for teachers to make schools safe and inclusive:





## Manage emotions and control frustrations

Teachers need to be equipped with the ability 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.

How can this be done?

- Teacher training to equip teachers with knowledge, skills, and confidence to use positive discipline techniques to manage classroom behaviour. Positive discipline includes setting clear expectations of behaviours in the classroom while praising
- Creating opportunities for self-examinations. Providing a safe space 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.



### Get Inspired

## SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PROMOTING TEACHER TRAINING TO END CORPORAL PUNISHMENT IN SCHOOLS

Amal International School, a faith-based school affiliated with Islam, is located in Colombo and provides primary and secondary education for boys. The school leadership took the initiative to establish the Training and Development Unit (T&D Unit), which focuses on policy implementation and teacher training to ensure that all aspects of the school are child-friendly. Based on the non-violent teachings of Islam, the school adopted a policy on disciplinary actions and established a special committee to oversee its implementation. As a result, Amal International School was successful in eradicating 98 per cent of corporal punishment at school. Through this process, the school also learned that some students experience violence and corporal punishment at home. Based on its findings, the school recently established the Parenting for Success Programme to address the issue of domestic violence and corporal punishment at home through providing psychological, medical, and spiritual guidance for families of their students. In this example, school leadership is being proactive about policy setting and implementation that is guided by religious values.

<sup>29</sup> World Health Organization, *School-based violence prevention: a practical handbook*, Geneva, 2019.



## Be a role model

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

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

Simple gestures such as having a loving and caring tone of voice, or welcoming every child by their name in the morning, are powerful ways to boost children's self-esteem and their self-confidence. A few tips for teachers include:

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



## Keep in Mind

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



Get Inspired

## A GREAT START OF THE DAY: GREETINGS AS A BASIS OF POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP AND APPRECIATION

At Hope Preschool and Early Childhood Development Centre in Rathgama, Galle District, students practise a series of daily rituals to create a positive and welcoming learning environment for all. In the morning, every child is greeted 'Good morning' and 'Ayubowan' (Sinhala for 'May you live long') by the teachers and to each other as they step into the classroom. Throughout the day, children address their peers as 'Punchi Yaluwa' ('Little friend' in Sinhala). When it is time for lunch, children recite a poem giving thanks to parents, nature, and those who provide food for them before eating. These rituals help children to start the day on an uplifting and positive note, spend the day deepening a sense of empathy, and to be thankful for the resources and food given to them. Addressing everyone as a friend helps create a friendly environment where everyone is equal and encourages the use of positive language. All of these notions are important and relevant in developing values and spirituality while discouraging the use of violence.

Hope Preschool also organizes cultural events for national celebrations, night camps for students to showcase their talents and to appreciate the stars in the night sky, and exploration tours for children to visit historical buildings and appreciate their environment. They also organize awareness raising programmes for parents to learn about child protection and positive parenting and family tours to provide opportunities for the entire family to visit and play together.







## 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 practises such as corporal punishment, bullying, and other violent behaviours are condoned in schools.

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

A few tips for teachers include:

- Use dialogue as an alternative to harsh physical punishment. This helps children understand what they did, why, and the impact on themselves and others.
- Ask children to create their own ground rules to deal with problems based on respect and empathy for one another.
- Examine your own assumption as a teacher and 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.







## Introduce interfaith learning

A great deal of violence is taught in faith community schools, including the supremacy of one's own religion, and therefore of one's ethnicity, and the insignificance of others. A divide created with the other is the 'enemy syndrome', where others are blamed for the downfalls of society. Mutual understanding and respect can only be nurtured when diverse religious communities work together to build a more inclusive narrative that understands interdependency and embraces one another.

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

Some tips for teachers include:

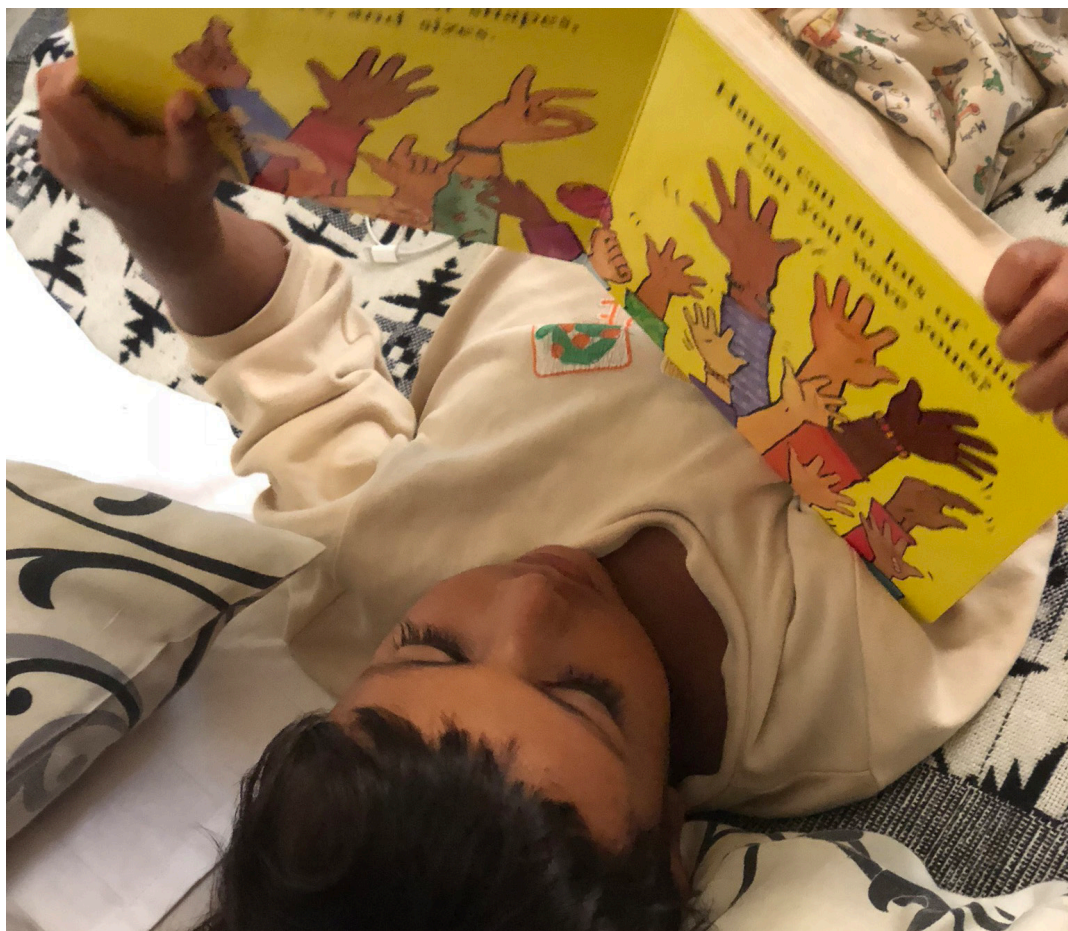
- Encourage the interaction with people of other faiths. This is also recalled in the Hindu scriptures that invite children to play with different people and to practise togetherness.
- Organize interfaith visits allowing children to learn about other places of worships, rituals, and religious practises.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



## Practise mindfulness in schools

Mindfulness is a practise where we are more aware of our own body, emotions, and thoughts. Such awareness helps to improve how we respond and interact with the reality around us. Mindfulness helps reach a state of well-being, inner contentment, and self-understanding. It improves focus, enables better mental health and emotional resilience, and promotes respect for others and empathy.

Although mindfulness has its roots in the Dhamma, followers of all religions can subscribe to it as a meditative way of life and as a strategy to curb the culture of violence. Teachers need to be trained to look at a crisis or provocation and respond in non-violent ways.





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## LOVING KINDNESS AND MEDITATION

Loving kindness and meditation is practised step by step in four different levels and can be used as a tool to inculcate empathy and non-violence.

The first level of meditation is with breathing and a quiet mind, which starts with ourselves.

The second level of meditation is extended to those who are around us.

The third level of meditation is extended to those who are indifferent to us.

The fourth level of meditation is extended to those who we are in conflict with.

The third and fourth levels of meditation are very important when working with children. The significance of extending our love and kindness to strangers needs to be reiterated. They may be indifferent to us today, but they could be our children's neighbour in the future, and if they are happy and protected, you can also be happy and protected. This 'interconnectedness' is key in the third level of meditation.

In the fourth level of meditation, it is towards people with whom you are in conflict and disagreement. If this person is 40 years old now, take a moment to imagine her or him as a five-year-old child. Many people would say that they can extend their love and kindness to any five-year-old child and empathize what could have happened to make this person become who she or he is today.

It is easy to imagine that perhaps there was a lack of love, bullying, or that the person was affected by poverty or violence.



### My own reflections

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## BRING THE DIALOGUE INTO YOUR COMMUNITY

Suggested format for discussion and dialogue.

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 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>30</sup>

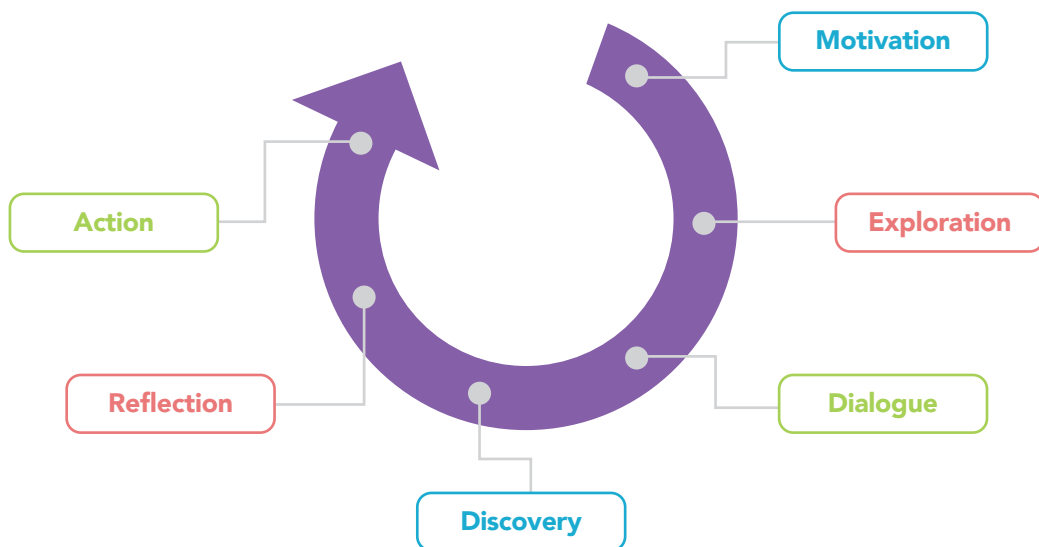
Share these points with the participants before the dialogue, so it is a safe and respectful place for all who take part:

- 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.

<sup>30</sup> Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, *A Trainer's Guide to Inter-faith Peacebuilding in Sri Lanka* (2013). [http://www.karunacenter.org/uploads/9/6/8/0/9680374/\\_karunacenter\\_inter-faith-tot-guide-2013.pdf](http://www.karunacenter.org/uploads/9/6/8/0/9680374/_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>31</sup>



### Motivation:

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

### Exploration:

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

<sup>31</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 44. 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 practises 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 home and schools? Please list any examples from your community.

### Question 2

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 3

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 4

What can faith-based organizations, civil society organizations, and schools do to challenge violence against children in the 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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