

TOOLKIT

Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years

A Contribution to the Protection
of Children from Violence and the
Promotion of Their Holistic Well-Being

BOOKLET VII

Guide for Religious and Spiritual Leaders

CONSORTIUM

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

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Booklet VII

Guide for Religious and Spiritual Leaders

Booklet VII provides guidance for religious and spiritual leaders on what they can do to support the spiritual development of children in the early years, thereby contributing to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

The recommendations and ideas found in this booklet have been developed in collaboration with multiple religious and spiritual leaders, representatives from governments and faith-based and civil society organizations, experts on children's issues, academics, pediatricians and educators. In particular, this booklet benefits from the reflections and recommendations provided during the roundtable discussions held in 2019 under the project *INSPIREd Faith Communities: Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence*, which took place in Brazil, India, Kenya, Lebanon and Sri Lanka. It also considers the reflections during the consultations with religious and spiritual leaders that took place in 2022 as part of the overall development of the Toolkit.

The guide for religious and spiritual leaders has three sections.

- The Role of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in Supporting Children's Spiritual Development as a Contribution to Protecting Them from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being
- How Religious and Spiritual Leaders Can Support and Promote the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years as They Work with Their Communities, Interact with Parents, Caregivers and Educators, and Engage in Advocacy for Policy Change
- Interreligious Dialogue and Action for Protecting Children from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being

This booklet is part of a series of 7 Booklets that together form the Toolkit "Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years – A Contribution to the Protection of Children from Violence and the Promotion of Their Holistic Well-Being."

It is highly recommended that religious and spiritual leaders become familiar with the previous booklets, particularly Booklet I on the Conceptual Framework, as it contains important information that will strengthen understanding of key topics and provide more substance to the ideas and recommendations provided in this booklet.

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The Role of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in Supporting Children's Spiritual Development as a Contribution to Protecting Them from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being

Around the world, religious and spiritual leaders serve as important moral and spiritual authorities that can positively influence social and behavioral change. As a religious or spiritual leader, you play a critical role in supporting parents, caregivers, educators, and communities in fostering the spiritual development of children in the early years. You are also uniquely positioned to help communities to challenge structures and social and cultural norms that violate children's human dignity.

In many contexts, religious and spiritual leaders are also community leaders. Leaders like you are usually trusted in equal or even greater measure than other influencers within their societies. People listen to religious and spiritual leaders. You represent institutions with the potential to challenge and counter-balance injustices in societies. Government officials, businesses and other community stakeholders often recognize religious and spiritual actors as impartial, influential ethical voices. This invests you with great potential to inspire your communities to take action to protect children from violence and promote their holistic well-being.

When you, as a religious or spiritual leader, focus on the ethical aspects of child upbringing, including supporting non-violent approaches to parenting and promoting the spiritual development of children, you can make a crucial contribution to the peace and harmony of families and broader communities. This helps to break the vicious cycle whereby violence is transmitted down the generations. You can accomplish this by re-examining textual interpretations, cultural traditions and de facto practices which condone violence against children, as well as by promoting the social norms and values already embedded in your religious and spiritual traditions that affirm and protect the dignity of each and every child.

Your role as a religious or spiritual leader can have a wide reach. You can exercise a unique influence on the believers in your community but also beyond it, when you work together with religious and spiritual leaders from other communities, government authorities, and institutions working for the well-being of children. Engagement in interreligious dialogue and collaboration with child protection institutions can create a ripple effect in the society, helping to inspire greater investment in early childhood development, child protection, advocacy, and programming and services for children and families.

Religious and spiritual leaders also have a critical responsibility to challenge any form of violence against children that some people attempt to justify or condone in the name of religion, both within and outside their own religious or spiritual communities, including the harmful practices that are at times culturally accepted.

Addressing violence against children in early childhood is a moral imperative and an ethical demand that requires collaboration among different people and sectors of societies, and you, as a religious or spiritual leader, are well placed to inspire or lead these efforts.

You can also support the spiritual development of children as a contribution to protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being by:

1. Empowering parents and caregivers by supporting them to reduce violent parenting practices and build positive parent-child relationships;
2. Challenging and helping to transform social and cultural norms that condone harmful practices and the use of violence against children;
3. Strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender-equitable relationships for all children; and
4. Promoting education of children that is inclusive of life skills by prioritizing socio-emotional learning, spiritual well-being and the development of prosocial behaviors.

All of these proved to be effective strategies for ending violence against children, according to *INSPIRE – Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children*.¹

All told, religious and spiritual leaders are powerful forces for good and critical allies in creating a better world for children.

This Toolkit encourages religious and spiritual leaders to continue using their influence and authority in the communities they lead, when interacting with parents, caregivers, schools and educators, and when raising their voices to advocate for policies that can protect children and help create the conditions for their holistic well-being.



Layers of influence of religious and spiritual leaders

Your influence across several layers of the child development ecosystem can be a powerful contribution to ending violence against children and strengthen the protective factors that support their holistic well-being. You can help build societies where children grow up with full access to their spiritual development, which, in turn, can equip them to become positive agents of change in their communities.

¹ 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. https://who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/inspire/en/

How Religious and Spiritual Leaders Can Support and Promote the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years

This section outlines concrete ways that you, as a religious or spiritual leader, can provide guidance and support that will help with nurturing the spiritual development of children, thereby contributing to protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being. It provides ideas and recommendations for supporting and influencing your community, as well as parents and caregivers, schools and educators, and governments and their policies. These ideas are meant to be inspiring, but also to be adaptable and useful within your own religious or spiritual tradition, institutional framework, and local context.

In religious and spiritual communities

“It is important to understand that spirituality is not only measured by how much you pray, how often you fast, your dress code or your diet, but most importantly, by how these acts of worship empower you to interact with and live alongside fellow humans beings.”

— Dr. Imam Rashied Omar, Claremont Mosque, Cape Town, South Africa¹

As a religious and spiritual leader, you have a powerful and unique influence in the community you serve. You can contribute to the creation of nurturing, safe, respectful and violence-free environments for children by fostering a positive theological understanding of the significance of the child in your communities. You can promote dialogues and reflections in your communities about the critical importance of children’s spirituality and holistic development in the early years, and the significance of early childhood in your religious and spiritual tradition. Such dialogues and reflections can also help to challenge practices and beliefs that contribute to the use of violence against children in any of its forms: physical, emotional, spiritual, etc. You can help by creating spaces and modeling styles of relating that affirm children’s dignity and ensure that your religious and spiritual community — and the broader community, as well — are always safe and supportive of children’s growth, development and thriving.

Recommendations



Creating safe spaces for dialogue



Challenging and transforming social and cultural norms



Making religious and spiritual communities child-friendly spaces



Mobilizing against harmful traditional practices



Creating safe spaces for dialogue

Within your own religious or spiritual community, you can create safe spaces for children and for adults to dialogue on the importance of early childhood and child holistic development and how to protect children from violence. This includes creating dialogue about the impact of climate change as a form of structural violence impacting children's well-being and their future and the many ways communities can help to address or mitigate climate change.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Initiate dialogue programs or sessions in your community to create awareness about the importance of early childhood development and highlight what the community can do to support children's spiritual development and well-being. You can use the specific activities provided in Booklet II – Learning Program for Adults (Module 1) to support your dialogue.
- Organize activities during special days and celebrations, for instance the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children¹¹ celebrated each year on November 20, which coincides with Universal Children's Day, to reflect with your religious community about children, their rights, their well-being and what the community is doing to protect them from violence — and take some concrete action for children together.
- Use sermons and opportunities for reflection that can lead community members toward self-examination and dialogue. Address questions like: Why does violence against children occur? How is violence against children explained in our religious traditions and what do our sacred texts say about protecting children from violence? What types of violence affect children in our community? What can we do to protect children from violence?
- Raise awareness about the impact of climate change in early childhood and promote self-examination of practices that can be drivers of environmental degradation, for

¹¹ The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children was initiated by Arigatou International in 2008. It brings together children, religious leaders and religious communities, teachers, parents, and organizations working for and with children at the grassroots level. Learn more: <https://prayerandactionforchildren.org/world-day-events>

instance pollution, rising energy consumption, or the depletion of natural resources, among others.²

- Create dialogue about the complementarity between the common values shared among different religions and spiritual traditions and the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. You can use *Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child*.³
- When dialogue and reflection take place within your own community, it may be helpful to invite members of other communities as well to engage in joint reflections.

NOTE: In “Interreligious Dialogue and Action for Protecting Children from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being” on page 28 onwards, you can also find a model to bring dialogue on the issues of violence in early childhood into your community in practical ways.



Challenging and transforming social and cultural norms

“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 by religions institutions, 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 challenge and face the reality in front of us.”

— Rev. Duleep de Chickera, former Bishop of the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka⁴

Recalling the image of children as blessings and gifts, and the affirmation of their dignity in all religious traditions, it cannot be denied that there is a contradiction between the reality children face in communities around the world and the teachings of the world’s religions and spiritual traditions.

The misinterpretation of religious texts has been used as a justification of violence against children. It is of paramount importance for religious and spiritual leaders to mobilize their communities and to question and raise awareness about interpretations of sacred texts that sanction the use of violence against children.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Self-examine the practices in your community that condone violence against children. You can challenge such practices using sacred texts that affirm children’s dignity, support non-violent practices, and create a positive narrative of the human dignity of the child.
- Influence families, parents, and caregivers to de-normalize violence against children and disconnect violent discipline practices from religious and spiritual beliefs and

understandings. This can be done by providing positive examples of alternatives to violent discipline and how those benefit the future and healthy development of the child, and providing education and training to empower the use of positive parenting techniques.

- Use scientific evidence to explain the negative impact of violence against children on their development, particularly in the early years of life. Refer to Booklet I – Conceptual Framework for evidence to support this effort.
- Draw from the essence of religious teachings and sacred texts to emphasize the importance of nurturing children’s spiritual development by creating safe, respectful and violence-free environments, supporting positive relationships and providing empowering experiences for children that can act as a protective factor against violence.



Making religious and spiritual communities child-friendly spaces

Nurturing the spiritual development of children makes a major contribution to their holistic well-being. Places of worship can be spaces where children can get in touch with their inner selves and discover themselves and others, and benefit from spiritual nourishment. Religious and spiritual communities also need to be safe, respectful and free of violence, sacred spaces where children’s dignity is always protected and affirmed.

“The profound value for the child in Hinduism matters very little unless it leads to practices that nurture and foster the flourishing of the child. For example, it must find expression in the eradication of the sexual exploitation and physical abuse of children. These are gross violations of the cardinal Hindu ethical principle of non-injury, or ahimsa.”

— Prof. Anantanand Rambachan, St. Olaf College, United States of America⁵

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Create spaces within the place of worship to play and listen to children, as this can become a form of child protection.
- Create opportunities for parents, caregivers and educators to nurture the spiritual development of their children. Support the implementation of Booklet III – Activities for Children, by offering time and space for these activities to take place in your community.
- Develop a child protection and child safeguarding policy for your place of worship or community. This involves creating measures to prevent and report child abuse, providing safe spaces for community members to discuss solutions for violence against children, and for children to talk with trusted adults about any violence they may experience, and develop mechanisms for supporting and protecting child victims of violence. This includes fostering awareness not only about the impact violence has on children but also of how this can affect parents and caregivers who use violence against the child.

- Enhance child participation within your place of worship by holding dialogues with children, listening to and considering their opinions and ideas, and allowing them to be involved in weekly, monthly or special occasion routine tasks. Such practices enhance their self-value.



Mobilizing against harmful traditional practices

To end harmful traditional practices, religious and spiritual leaders can create safe spaces for reflection and dialogue about these issues. For example, you can help parents, caregivers, educators and other community members to understand why these practices violate the sanctity and dignity of the child, and you can make use of sacred texts that condemn violence against children.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Create awareness of and delegitimize violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), recognizing that every child, regardless of their gender, is a precious gift from God, the Divine, the Transcendent, or Ultimate Reality.
- Create dialogues with the community on which traditional practices may be harmful to children and why, for example: Advocate against early and forced marriages if it is relevant in your local area; stand against female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), which, in some communities, is believed to be a religious requirement, indicating the readiness for marriage.
- Take action to disconnect harmful practices from religion and be at the forefront of condemning publicly violent practices, such as FGM/C, corporal punishment, or sexual exploitation and abuse of children, among other forms of violence.
- Use social media and TV or radio to raise awareness and share narratives that challenge social norms condoning harmful traditional practices. Promote theological reflections that affirm the human dignity of children and the sacredness of their lives.

With parents and caregivers

“Parents have a sacred duty to care for and educate their children, as newly arrived human beings who have been entrusted to them. A mother and father are the first gurus in a child’s life and must therefore rise up to the best in themselves to love and guide their children.”

Gurdev Mata, Gurdev Pita

The Divine Guru is my Mother, the Divine Guru is my Father

Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, p. 250

Perspectives from the Sikh Dharam⁶

Religious and spiritual leaders can play an important role in influencing parents and caregivers to create safe places in the family where children can experience love, connection, protection and nurturing. It is within the family that the child is first nurtured and begins to grow spiritually, but also it is sadly within the family that often children experience violence for the first time — and for many, this happens in recurrent ways.

The approach offered in this Toolkit for nurturing the spiritual development of children requires three main conditions: (1) creation of safe, respectful and violence-free environments; (2) positive relationships; and (3) empowering experiences. All of these support the emergence and flourishing of children’s innate spiritual capacities. As parents and caregivers get familiar with ways to support children in these three areas, they increasingly engage in a conscious process of nurturing their own spirituality that is mutually reinforcing with their efforts to nurture their children’s spirituality. As a religious or spiritual leader, you are well positioned to support and accompany parents and caregivers on this journey.

We encourage you to initiate programs for parents and caregivers in your community to equip them to nurture children’s spiritual development in order to help protect them from violence and promote their holistic well-being. You can follow the program outlined in Booklet II – Learning Program for Adults, which can be used to train faith actors in your community, so they can then initiate programs to equip parents and caregivers, using the specific guidance in Booklet VI – Guide for Facilitators.

Recommendations

 Encouraging positive parenting	 Stressing the importance of role-modeling
 Encouraging fathers to engage in early childhood parenting	 Addressing violence against children in the home



Encouraging positive parenting

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

— Chief Acharya Swami Sadatmananda Saraswathi, India⁷

Religious and spiritual leaders can inspire and encourage parents and caregivers to use non-violent forms of upbringing that affirm the dignity of the child, by creating spaces and environments for children that are loving and respectful, safe and free of violence.

You can equip parents and caregivers with concrete ideas and tools for nurturing children's spiritual development in the early years, thus helping to protect them from violence and promote their well-being. You can use counseling and home visits to provide support to parents and caregivers.

Parents and caregivers can be encouraged to reflect on their parenting practices, particularly those that might be harmful for children. This self-reflection process needs to challenge the use of corporal punishment and harmful traditional practices, as well as all other forms of violence that affect children's physical, emotional, social and spiritual well-being.

Violence-free parenting requires that parents and caregivers put themselves in the shoes of children so that they can better understand the reasons for their behaviors, frustrations, and difficulties. It is essential to support parents with tools so they can empathize with their children and guide them to express their feelings and emotions in words and engage in helpful dialogue and positive change, rather than turning to corporal or verbal abuse of the child.

Religious and spiritual leaders could encourage parents and caregivers to:

- Spend quality time with children; take time to play, listen to them, share stories, and attend to their needs.
- Use a restorative approach to address challenging behaviors; instead of punishing children using fear or physical violence, discuss with them why the behavior happened, review the consequences it had for them and others, and teach them how to act differently. With younger children, parents and caregivers can correct the child calmly and gently.
- Encourage children to explore and dream, to play and be themselves. Do not limit them to imposing your own ideas.
- Offer the child choices and allow them to make decisions on a daily basis in activities or events that affect them. Ensure that they are safe and meaningful for the child, such as choosing a book to read.
- 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 their natural inclination towards goodness and altruism.
- Refrain from using harmful comments such as "boys don't cry"; these expressions reinforce unhealthy views of masculinity and prevent children from feeling and expressing their emotions.
- Use respect and empathy when addressing challenging behavior with children; pause and try to understand that the child might be tired, overwhelmed, or needing attention.
- Teach children to meditate or pray, as it helps them calm themselves, and strengthens their capacity to deal with problems in peaceful ways.



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 behavior, such as positive discipline that teaches prosocial behavior.

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



Stressing the importance of role-modeling

“Your son or daughter is like you with his or her bad and good attributes, and you are responsible for his or her education before God.”

– Sheikh Kasem Jabak, Lebanon⁸

Children look up to their parents and caregivers as role models and observe how adults around them interact with one another. By observing adult role models, they can learn either the keys to positive relationships or negative prejudices and discriminatory norms. This is why adults must also focus on nurturing their own spirituality and values, so that they become positive role models and provide children with a safe, emotionally secure environment.

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 can communicate using the conventions of spoken or written language.⁹

It is crucial for parents and caregivers to practice and model the values they would like their children to follow, as opposed to trying to impose those values with fear and punishment. Values cannot just be preached; they need to be nurtured in a safe environment free of violence and fear. One of the best ways to stop the cycle of violence is for parents to model non-violence and demonstrate positive attitudes and values.

Religious and spiritual leaders could encourage parents and caregivers to:

- Practice and model the values they want to transmit to their children, showing “the value of their values” to children, as opposed to trying to impose values only in the form of commandments.
- Respect the views of children, their ideas, and interests, and allow children to express themselves freely. Engage in dialogue with them.
- Engage children in service activities so they can learn responsibility, empathy, compassion, and solidarity through practice and action. Give children opportunities to

take the lead, such as helping to serve the family meal or giving to those in need. Such practices build self-confidence.

- Be aware of their own words, behaviors and actions as parents or caregivers, as those are the best example and teacher for their children. Children learn from their examples.
- Treat all members of the family with empathy and respect and solve disagreements in non-violent ways, using dialogue.
- Model respect for people from different religious traditions or diverse backgrounds by engaging with them and creating opportunities for children to spend time with people who practice a different religion.



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!



Encouraging fathers to engage in early childhood parenting

Religious and spiritual leaders can encourage fathers to be more engaged in parenting, since cultural norms often assign this role exclusively to mothers. Early involvement enables fathers to build deeper bonds with their children. Parenting programs for fathers have shown that greater engagement in the early years helps to reduce the incidence of intimate partner violence and abusive punishment of children over time.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Invite fathers to a gathering in your community to discuss the importance of early childhood and the impact that violence has on children, and talk about the ways they can become more engaged in their children's care and nurturing.
- Organize meetings with boys and men, in an intergenerational format, to discuss the root causes of violence against girls and women; reflect on gender equality; and discuss the normalization of violence.
- Promote examples of fathers' full engagement.
- Challenge gender norms in sermons and during family visits by providing examples and reflections that support the father's role in the upbringing of children and the practice of respect for women and girls.



Addressing violence against children in the home

“The lack of dialogue as a key factor in the education process of children is one of the main expressions of violence.”

– Pastor Romi Márcia Bencke, Lutheran Pastor, Brazil¹⁰

Globally, it is estimated that close to 300 million children between the ages of two and four (three in four children in this age range) experience violent discipline — physical punishment and/or psychological aggression — from their caregivers on a regular basis. Around 6 in 10 one-year-olds in 30 countries with available data are subjected to violent discipline on a regular basis. Nearly a quarter of one-year-olds are physically shaken as punishment, and nearly 1 in 10 are hit or slapped on the face, head or ears.¹¹

Religious and spiritual leaders are well positioned to challenge violent ways of raising children and address violence that takes place in the home.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Use sermons and other activities to encourage parents and caregivers to strengthen communication and dialogue with their children as a protective factor against the use of violent forms of discipline.
- Use home visits to identify signs that a child is at risk of violence. Religious and spiritual leaders often play the role of counselors and are trusted with sensitive information around children and family. This role can be strengthened with more training on how 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 and spiritual leaders, however, so it is important that you can make referrals to the national legal systems and other appropriate support systems when needed.
- Stress the importance of unconditional love for the child. Advise parents and caregivers that it is important for the child to know that the love of their parents and caregivers is unconditional. No matter how they do in school or in sports, or if they misbehave sometimes, they need to be sure their parents will always love them. Unconditional love makes the child feel secure and appreciated and contributes to building the child's character, identity, and self-esteem from an early age.



KEEP IN MIND: **DIALOGUE WITH CHILDREN**

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

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

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

Schools and educators

"If a child is not allowed to be a child, he or she will become an adult very early."

– Gaiaku Deusimar D'Lisá, Candomblé African traditional religion, Brazil¹²

Religious institutions have traditionally played an important role in education. Schools and day-care centers 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. Schools and day care centers become a central part of the child's experiences, contributing to their holistic development and character formation. They can be a positive force for change and transformation of our societies, but they can also be places where violence and inequalities are reproduced, since schools often mirror the injustices in our societies.

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

Given the important role that religious institutions and faith-based organizations have traditionally played in education, they can make a key contribution to supporting the education sector, particularly the schools where they have influence, by integrating the spiritual development of children into the curriculum and school approach and ensuring the protection of children from all forms of violence.

We encourage you to initiate programs for educators in your educational institutions to equip them to nurture children's spiritual development, and thereby to contribute to protecting children from violence and promoting their holistic well-being. You can follow the program outlined in Booklet II – Learning Program for Adults to train faith actors in your community, who can then use the specific guidance in Booklet VI – Guide for Facilitators to initiate programs with educators.

Recommendations



Making schools and day-care centers safe places for children



Introducing interreligious learning



Emphasizing the inclusion of spiritual development in curricula



Strengthening children's agency



Making schools and day-care centers safe places for children

To ensure schools are environments where all children can flourish, as well as safe places for them to be and develop, teachers need to have a good understanding of child development, including a deep knowledge of how to protect children from violence, as well as of the impact of violence on child development.

Schools need to be safe environments where peace and non-violence guide all interactions. Schools need to be safe places to learn, helping to strengthen children's identities, fostering inclusion and representation, and embracing pluralism by appreciating similarities and differences across ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultures.

Too often, violent practices such as corporal punishment, bullying, and other violent behaviors are condoned or tolerated in schools. The best alternative to violent discipline is to build a respectful environment and foster positive relationships between educators and children. In this kind of environment, children can express their views, ask questions, feel heard and be recognized. Challenging behaviors are not punished but discussed and dealt with using a restorative approach that affirms children's dignity and helps them learn to manage their emotions.

Efforts to raise awareness and increase training capacity in educators and administrators are necessary to ensure that schools are safe, engaging, nurturing, and positive environments that contribute to the development of thriving children.

What religious and spiritual leaders could encourage schools to do:

- Have a child protection and safeguarding policy in place to keep children safe and protected from any harm.
- Train all educators and personnel about the importance of spiritual development as a contribution to the protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

- Organize roundtable discussions in schools about children’s rights and the affirmation of their dignity involving all school staff, parents, and caregivers.
- Empower educators with knowledge, skills, and confidence to use assertive methods and techniques to manage challenging behavior in the classroom, employing non-violent strategies and particularly emphasizing the use of dialogue.
- Create opportunities for educators to reflect and examine their assumptions, bias, experiences and beliefs about violence and violent discipline inflicted on children. This also includes guiding educators to reflect on their own attitudes about violence, gender, power and authority dynamics, and diversity in the classroom and in the school. These safe spaces can allow teachers moments for dialogue where they can discover alternative ways to foster and enhance learners’ engagement and academic achievement.
- Recognize and address any bullying and discrimination in the classroom and empower children to deal with these situations in positive ways.



Introducing interreligious learning

One of the worst forms of violence against children — and really against our whole world — is the indoctrination of their fragile minds with both religious and secular ideologies based on division between “us” and “them,” that encourage distrust and hatred of anyone who is different. Whether the pretense is religious or not, when children are taught that “our side” is all good and “the other side” is all evil, we are only sowing the seeds of future violence. “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being,” and thus it is in the human heart — not on the battlefield or in the streets — that the true battle must be fought.

– Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President, Arigatou International¹³

Mutual understanding and respect can be further nurtured when diverse religious and spiritual communities work together to build a more inclusive narrative that supports interconnectedness and encourages the embrace of differences and shared humanity.

The curricula at religious schools can integrate interfaith learning approaches that foster ethics and values that affirm diversity, the interconnectedness of all people, and respect for people of different religions and spiritual traditions. By learning about other traditions, children discover that there are universal values and notions such as empathy, respect and non-violence, as well as similarities between different religious and spiritual practices. They also learn to better appreciate what is unique about their own religious or spiritual tradition. This strengthens their capacity from the early years to interact with people who are different, and it equips them with the attitudes and skills they will need to learn to live together in today’s diverse, pluralistic societies.

Religious and spiritual leaders could encourage schools to:

- Foster interaction between children of diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds. Invite children to learn from one another, by sharing their beliefs, traditions, and foods, so they can discover their similarities and differences.

- Organize interfaith visits to allow children to learn about other places of worship, rituals, and religious and spiritual practices. After the visit, encourage children to reflect on what they saw, heard, touched, smelled, and did. This early experience of visiting the sacred place of the other can have a lifelong impact on children’s ability to thrive amidst differences.
- Involve parents in interfaith visits or invite them to dialogue with representatives from other religions or spiritual traditions.
- Organize festivals that celebrate all religions and allow children to be actively engaged in their organization and to participate.
- Use music lessons or singing times to share songs from other religious and spiritual traditions.
- Allow students to come together to pray from their different religious perspectives, as this demonstrates respect for one another, enhances children’s own religious identity, and helps them acknowledge and appreciate the other.
- Use traditional games and play to teach children unity, gratitude and respect for differences.
- Use stories from sacred texts to nurture ethical values.



Emphasizing the inclusion of spiritual development in curricula

Children are taught to read and write in the early years. The spiritual development of the child, however, is often not considered or adequately articulated in curricula for the early years. It is of crucial importance that early learning centers and schools address the spiritual development of the child as part of their holistic well-being.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Organize a meeting with the school leadership to dialogue about the importance of including time and space in early childhood curricula and classroom to nurture the spiritual development of children, in order to help protect them from violence and promote their holistic well-being.
- Introduce school leadership to this Toolkit. Explore and explain how the school can easily and effectively integrate the Toolkit within its existing curricula or programs. Identify what existing resources, tools or programs the school has that can complement this work, and discuss opportunities and entry points in the curricular and extra-curricular activities and the school’s approach with young children that can be utilized for this purpose. Refer to Booklet II – Learning Program for Adults and Booklet IV – Guide for Organizations for helpful information about how to have these conversations.
- Organize a training program for school leadership to equip them to integrate the spiritual development of children into the school curricula and train the educators in the school. You can use Booklet V – Guide for Trainers and Booklet VI – Guide for Facilitators to support the training and introduce the suggested Learning Program.
- Support and promote activities to nurture children’s spiritual development in extracurricular activities or integrate them into various subjects or lessons. Booklet III

– Activities for Children is full of evidence-based ideas that are easy to implement and require very few additional resources.



Strengthening children's agency

Often, education systems tend to use vertical approaches to teaching that can undermine children's empowerment and capacity to develop their ability to take initiative, show responsibility, and take action to pursue their goals and bring about change. Early learning centers and schools can, instead, support the active participation of children in the learning process through play, singing, the arts, introspection, prayer, meditation in the early years. Activities like these help to create a learning environment that fosters children's inner capacities and strengthens their agency, both of which support academic learning outcomes.

As religious and spiritual leaders and communities often are engaged in providing education and daycare services, they can be the drivers of change and catalyze transformation by engaging with the educators and the school leadership.

Religious and spiritual leaders could encourage schools and educators to:

- Use participatory and collaborative pedagogical approaches that allow young children to connect with others in meaningful ways through play and other activities, collective learning and community engagement.
- Create opportunities for conversations and open dialogue among educators and children.
- Introduce life skills that support social and emotional learning in children and that strengthen their capacity to manage their emotions, make decisions, solve problems and develop positive relationships with others.
- Create spaces for the active, genuine participation of children in the school's decisions and set aside time to listen to their ideas and recommendations.
- Support children's initiative from the early years by encouraging them to make choices and put their ideas into action.

Governments and policy makers

"Religious leaders must commit to awareness-building to protect and reclaim open spaces for trusting cooperation in cohesive communities, which must go beyond information provision to touching the heart, leading to action of the heart, soul and hands (conscientization)."

– Dr. Kezevino Aram, President, Shanti Ashram, India¹⁴

Religious and spiritual leaders hold a unique position as individuals with moral authority in many nations and local communities. As an influential and respected leader, you have great potential

to positively affect policies, programs and legislation, to ensure that full support is provided to children and families and that government policies and programs include explicit provisions designed to protect children from violence and contribute to their holistic well-being.

By working together with other religious and spiritual communities, organizations and institutions, as well as non-profits and civil society groups committed to promoting children's rights and well-being, you can advocate for changes in the legal system to protect children from violence. Stronger child protection mechanisms and a better developed legal framework allow for more standardized and effective measures to be implemented to support children's well-being.

Recommendations



Advocating for legislation on child protection

Child protection includes legal safeguarding policies that can contribute to ending all forms of violence against children, including harmful practices, abuse and neglect. Children have a legal right to protection, as outlined in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that 'governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.'¹⁵

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Advocate to policymakers that they should make needed reforms to the legal framework for child protection, appealing to the universal moral imperative to protect children from all forms of violence.
- Advocate for legislation to protect children from child abuse and neglect, including ending gender-based violence and child marriage.
- Where one does not already exist, support the creation of a comprehensive birth registration system that can provide legal proof of identity and help protect children from violence, abuse and exploitation. Without a birth certificate, children are unable to prove their age, which puts them at a much higher risk of being forced into early marriage, child labor, or early recruitment into the armed forces.

- Urge your national government to invest more in early childhood and produce better, disaggregated data on violence against children. Ask for an increase in national budget allocation for programs that support children’s holistic well-being from the early years of life, as well as programs that support parents and caregivers.
- Campaign for the prohibition of corporal punishment and other humiliating punishment of children in the home, alternative care settings, day care and schools.
- Support the creation of child helplines children can use to report violence and abuse.
- Hold States accountable for the violation of children’s rights, for instance by submitting alternative reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child or advocating for better responses to issues affecting children.
- Mobilize efforts to advocate for public policies that support integrated services that respond to the needs of children; for instance, advocating for child protection services that include child, gender, disability-sensitive social programs, parenting support, access to safe learning, and healthcare including mental health, as well as access to justice.
- Advocate for policies that prevent gun violence. Gun violence is a growing phenomenon around the world. Many children and youth are exposed to gun violence each year, either as victims or witnesses at home, at school, in their communities, or through the media. Gun violence exposure can leave lasting emotional scars on children, including anger, withdrawal, post-traumatic stress, and desensitization to violence.¹⁶
- Commemorate the Day of Prayer and Action for Children on November 20, which is also Universal Children’s Day, through advocacy and awareness-raising activities. Select specific topics, such as gender-based violence, to sensitize governments and civil society about their impact on early childhood; include success stories, and advocate for the enactment of laws that support child protection, healthy development, and well-being.
- Commemorate the World Day for Prevention, Healing and Justice to End Sexual Violence Against Children and Adolescentsⁱⁱⁱ on November 18 by raising awareness about the impact of child sexual abuse on children.



Promoting programs and policies to support families

The lack of adequate and comprehensive support for families contributes to the daily pressure and stress that parents and caregivers experience, particularly those from more vulnerable communities. This pressure produces toxic stress that is transmitted to children in the form of neglect and physical and emotional violence.

It is of paramount importance to address this reality with consistent public policies and programs that contribute to ending violence and strengthen child protection. Some of these policies need to involve income and economic strengthening interventions that can benefit children by reducing child maltreatment and decreasing intimate partner violence, thereby minimizing the likelihood that children witness such violence and suffer the consequences, including the potential that children themselves become victims or perpetrators of violence.¹⁷

ⁱⁱⁱ A day of observance to grow awareness of the need to protect children from sexual abuse and bring healing to victims and survivors of childhood trauma. More information can be found on the Global Collaborative website: <https://globalcollaborative.org>

Violence against children is a public health issue that has decades-long negative impacts, incurring massive costs across societies. Failure to promote holistic well-being in early childhood also represents a terrible missed opportunity to create decades-long positive public health impacts. Policies need to include support for strengthening family programs that empower parents and caregivers with the skills they need to support the spiritual development of children, thus helping to protect them from violence and promote their holistic well-being.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Make public statements on national and international days, and at events, conferences, meetings, and assemblies, to highlight the need for creating comprehensive social protection policies that strengthen support for families, particularly the most vulnerable.
- Work in networks or collaborative platforms with people and institutions that provide care for children to advocate that their needs be addressed in holistic ways.
- Promote more investment and support for professionals working in children's care.
- Strengthen dialogue between your community and those involved in guaranteeing the rights of children in the broader community.
- Reinforce and extend family-focused public policies, involving psychosocial support and strengthening the parenting capacity of the aggressor, including psychosocial monitoring and substance abuse treatment, as appropriate.
- Advocate for income and economic strengthening efforts to support families in vulnerable conditions.
- Advocate for parenting programs to help parents and caregivers create safe, respectful and violence-free environments for children, develop positive relationships with them, and create empowering experiences for children to develop their spiritual capacities.



Raising awareness and joining advocacy efforts about structural violence that affects young children

Many families face difficulties in providing nurturing care for children due to the extreme conditions they live in, including poverty, political unrest, humanitarian crises, situations of food insecurity, harmful effects of toxic stress, or communities plagued by violence. These circumstances limit the availability of and access to social services and impair the capacity of caregivers to engage positively with and be responsive to the needs of their children.

Climate change is another major factor negatively impacting young children's development. Almost every child on earth is exposed to hazards related to climate change.¹⁸ Natural disasters have intensified child poverty and vulnerability and are directly causing migration and displacement due to extreme weather events.¹⁹ The climate change crisis has been further exacerbated by the overlapping crises of conflict, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other emerging and re-emerging diseases. These events cause great damage to the most vulnerable families and communities, increasing toxic stress that can alter the development of children's brain architecture in ways that are likely to "impair memory, executive function, and decision-making

in later life” thus negatively influencing academic performance, health, relationship formation, and other long-term life outcomes.²⁰

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Advocate for climate change legislation to reduce structural violence against children.^{iv} During your speeches, sermons and statements to the public, promote the importance of protecting the planet from climate change. Sign and promote petitions for environmental protection. Spread awareness of the impact climate change has on early childhood development and campaign to make the world more sustainable by caring for the earth and reducing our impact on the climate.
- Ask your financial service providers²¹ to ensure that they do not contribute to loans for construction of fossil fuel infrastructure.^v There must be no new investment in fossil fuel expansion²² if we want to contribute to accelerate the shift to renewable energy and securing a better and sustainable future for our children.
- Write an advocacy statement and meet key decision-makers in your community, lobbying them to take action to end child poverty. You can also organize children from your community to speak about what poverty means to them and how communities can work together to end child poverty and violence against children.
- Ask children for their opinions and record and send these responses to your national or local leaders, accompanied by an advocacy message — perhaps written by the children themselves — demanding action to address children’s needs and end child poverty.
- Commemorate the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty IDEP^{vi} on October 17 each year. You can take part in IDEP through awareness raising, advocacy, and other community mobilization events.



Advocating for gender equality

Gender inequality is a reality often accepted and normalized by men and women alike. It is also the primary cause of gender-based violence against women in many countries around the world. Promoting gender equality is critical for preventing violence and strengthening child protection.

In many communities, the birth of a boy is celebrated and preferred over the birth of a girl. Discrimination against girls is one of the most extreme forms of structural violence affecting children. Abuse against girls and women is profoundly ingrained and accepted in many communities; this abuse can include direct violence, but also early and forced marriages. Many children grow up witnessing extreme intimate partner violence, which has deep consequences for their physical and emotional development, including increasing the likelihood they will become perpetrators or victims of violence in adulthood.

^{iv} For more information on climate justice and the prevention of violence against children, see World Council of Churches (2022). *WCC joins event exploring link between violence against children and climate change*. Oikoumene: World Council of Churches. <https://oikoumene.org/news/wcc-joins-event-exploring-link-between-violence-against-children-and-climate-change>.

^v To read more about climate responsible finance and the moral imperative and responsibility to all children in the world, visit: UN News (2022). *UN joins faith-based initiative for shift towards climate-responsible finance*. United Nations. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/05/1117822>.

^{vi} The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (IDEP) is a global awareness event celebrated every year on October 17. It is an opportunity for reflection, advocacy and action to end child poverty and all other forms of poverty. <https://endingchildpoverty.org/idep/>.

The prevalence of gender-based violence is the result of discriminatory values deeply rooted in society. As these forms of violence are often normalized, it is important to challenge the social and cultural norms condoning them in order to promote behavioral change.

Efforts to promote gender-equitable norms and reduce gender-based violence are enhanced if they include men and boys as well as women and girls, though these efforts can benefit from having same-sex groups to help participants feel comfortable talking and exploring ideas.²³ These efforts have to include interventions that confront the entrenched beliefs and cultural norms from which gender inequalities develop, as well as efforts to engage all sectors of society in redressing these inequalities. Legislative advances are also needed, and they must be accompanied by other actions and campaigns to raise awareness and promote behavioral change.

What religious and spiritual leaders could do:

- Challenge gender norms through public sermons and during family visits by providing examples and reflections that foster respect for women and girls.
- Organize meetings with men and boys, in an intergenerational format, to discuss the root causes of violence against girls and women; reflect on gender equality; and discuss the normalization of violence.
- Promote examples of men's engagement in parenting and how it contributes to children's development.
- Call for zero tolerance of female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C). In many of the countries where FGM/C is performed, it is a deeply entrenched social norm rooted in gender inequality where violence against girls and women is socially acceptable. FGM/C causes gratuitous suffering and harm including immediate and long-term health risks, complications in childbirth and a denial of sexual pleasure. It violates the rights of women and girls to live free from harm, violence and discrimination. Some associate it with religious beliefs, although no sacred texts require it.^{vii}
- Start conversations about gender roles with young children in your community and challenge the traditional features and characteristics assigned to men and women. Point out the stereotypes that children constantly encounter, whether in the media, on the street or in school, and let them know that it's OK to be different. Encourage a culture of acceptance.^{viii}
- Talk about consent, bodily autonomy and accountability to boys and girls, and also listen to what they have to say about their experiences.

^{vii} Learn more about Islamic Relief Worldwide's work advocating to end female genital mutilation/cutting and information about what Islam says about FGM/C: <https://islamic-relief.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FGM-CSW62.pdf>.

^{viii} For further guidance, see: UN Women (2020). *Take Action: 10 ways you can help end violence against women, even during a pandemic*. <https://unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/11/compilation-take-action-to-help-end-violence-against-women>.

Interreligious Dialogue and Action for Protecting Children from Violence and Promoting Their Holistic Well-Being

“We need religions to hold us and bring us together, not to move us away.”

— Rabbi Pablo Berman, Israeli community of Paraná, Brazil²⁴

In collaboration with other religious or spiritual communities, plan a program for reflection and dialogue on the importance of the spiritual development of children for protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being (this can also be done within your own community.) It is vital that this dialogue takes place in a safe environment where everyone’s views are respected, and all feel safe to be, speak, and share. This does not mean that everyone must agree with one another. Dialogue is the beginning of a trust-building process, and the key is that everyone can listen and be heard without prejudice. To accomplish this, a space where all participants can be involved actively in the experience must be provided. You can organize interreligious dialogues and, if helpful, invite experts from the local child protection authority, pediatricians, or other child-focused organizations as resource persons to share information such as scientific evidence and other facts about violence against children or other issues that affect children’s development.

Interreligious dialogues should be designed to build mutual understanding and facilitate ways for people of different religious and spiritual beliefs to cooperate. They can be organized around specific topics, for example: the view of children in different religious and spiritual traditions; violence against children and how to protect them from violence; or the importance of parenting and families in children’s upbringing.

The primary purpose of such dialogues is to learn from one another, self-examine one’s own practices and beliefs, and acquire new understandings about children’s lives and how to care and support them. Ideally, these dialogues will lead to collaboration and concrete action to support children’s well-being.

Ground rules for dialogue²⁵

Share these suggested ground rules with the participants before the dialogue begins, to help shape a safe, respectful place for all who take part. Ask everyone to:

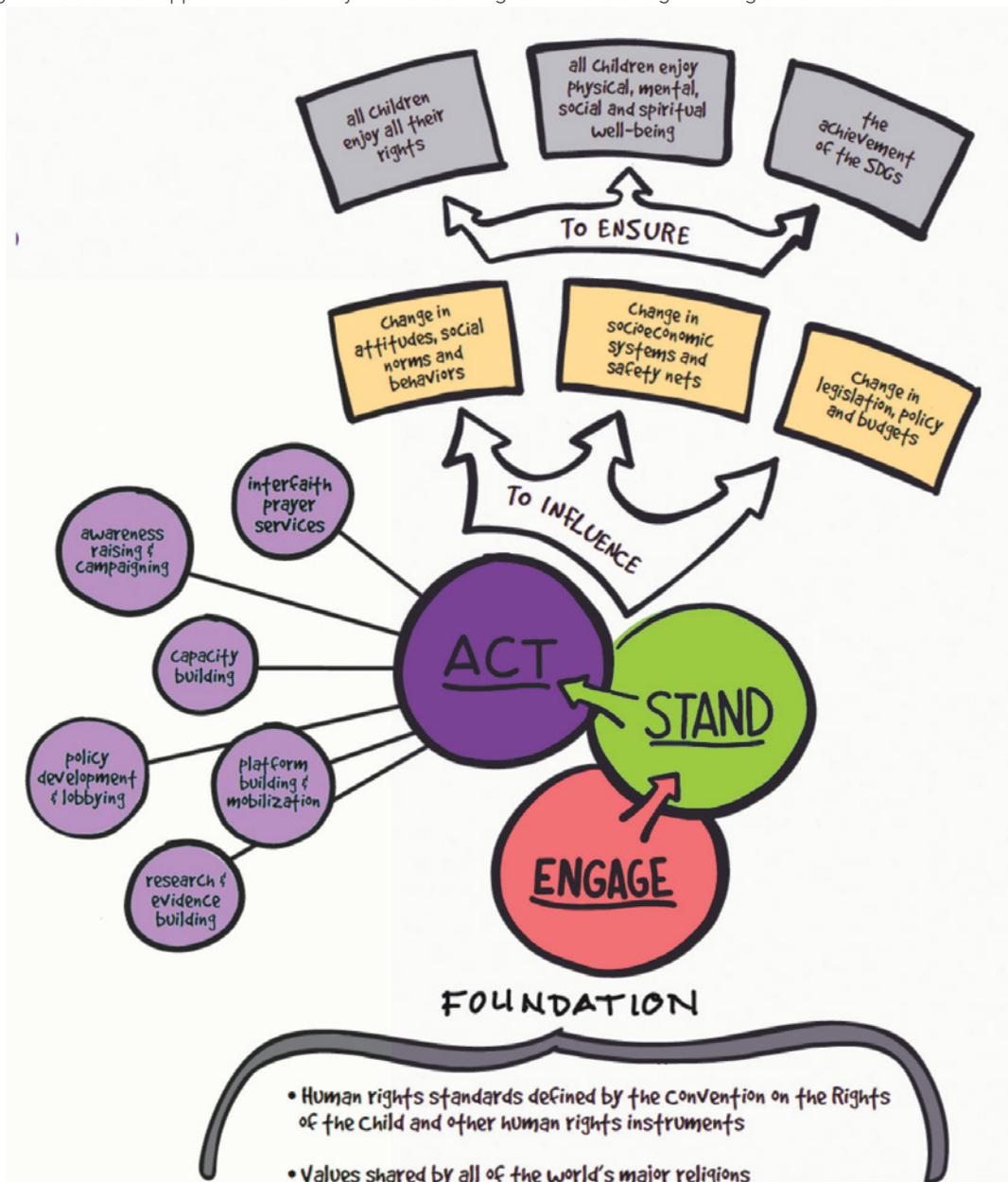
- Respect differences in experience and perspective.
- Speak truthfully and from your own experience.
- Do not try to persuade or change others’ views.
- Listen openly, respectfully, and without interruption.

- Allow time for those who are quieter to participate in the conversation.
- Honor confidentiality.
- Avoid using negative stereotypes or generalizations.
- Be willing to learn and be changed by the experience.

You can translate the fruit of your dialogue into action by encouraging the participants to suggest concrete ideas that can be accomplished through interreligious collaboration and with the participation of other partners and sectors of society — actions that support a holistic response to the issues affecting children.

The graphic below presents an Interfaith Approach to Advocacy for Children’s Rights and Well-Being that can be used to follow up on your interreligious dialogues to plan concrete actions to advocate for children’s rights, their protection from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

Figure: An Interfaith Approach to Advocacy for Children’s Rights and Well-Being from Arigatou International



The interfaith approach is built upon the three main components shown in the figure in red, green and blue. In more detail, these are: (1) engaging with other religious and spiritual communities and faith-inspired organizations; (2) standing together for a cause; and (3) acting across or within religious and spiritual communities to influence sustainable, transformative change for children at all three levels. This process is most effective when carefully adapted to diverse contexts. It should not be seen as a one-off event.

Additionally, the advocacy work rarely if ever proceeds in a straight line, as if marching from step to step. Instead, it is a non-linear and iterative process. It is not only common, but also helpful and necessary, to go back and forth several times during the advocacy process — for instance returning to the “Engage” step to engage with and mobilize more religious and spiritual communities or faith-inspired organizations, or returning to the “Stand” step to reinforce the shared vision and common cause, or to the “Act” step to add additional advocacy actions and tactics. The frequency and exact moments at which this will need to happen will depend on the local context and be shaped collaboratively by the participants involved.^{ix}

Ultimately, your work as a religious and spiritual leader in advocating and raising awareness about the importance of children’s spiritual development for protecting them from violence and promoting their holistic well-being, will have a ripple effect. It will create more impact when you join your efforts with others and use reflection based on theological understandings, dialogue and action to influence behavioral change in your community.

^{ix} *Advocating for Children’s Rights and Well-Being — An Interfaith Approach*. A Guide Jointly Developed by the Prayer and Action for Children and Global Network of Religions for Children Initiatives of Arigatou International https://prayerandactionforchildren.org/advocacy-guide/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Arigatou_International_Advocacy_Guide.pdf.

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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 protection of children from violence and the promotion of their holistic well-being.

CONSORTIUM

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