

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

18 February 2019
Colombo, Sri Lanka

Report of Roundtable Discussion



Brief report of the Roundtable discussion:

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

Monday, 18th February 2019
Sarvodaya Headquarters, Sri Lanka

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PANELISTS

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Prof. Savitri Goonesekere

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Jurist, academic, expert on the rights of women and children.

Ven. Galkande Dhammananda

Founder,
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Rt. Rev. Duleep de Chickera

Former Bishop,
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The tenets of faith communities and its actors encompass the safety and well-being of all people, including children. Faith leaders can inspire spiritual development and practical action that help to create safe environment for children by self-examining their own theological interpretations and challenging social and cultural norms that condone violence. Faith leaders are well positioned to advocate for violence-free and healthy child rearing practices in their communities. They can support families and caregivers to practice a positive and respectful caregiver-child relationship, which is foundational to the healthy development of the child, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually.

Children who experience intense stress during early childhood due to exposure to violence can suffer from reduced brain cell connections, negatively impacting their learning and emotional development, as well as their trust and relations with others.

The roundtable discussion on *Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence* took place on 18 February 2019 at the Sarvodaya Headquarters in Moratuwa and brought together more than 100 practitioners, religious leaders and experts on children's issues.

The Roundtable discussed the scientific evidence on the importance of Early

Childhood Development (ECD), in terms of learning and development, including its long-term impact on the child's physical and psychological well-being. It also increased awareness on violence against children in early childhood among religious communities and its networks with an aim to mobilize them to strengthen norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, and nurturing relations that contribute to ending parenting practices that violate the dignity of the child. This is a first of the series of multi-faith, multi-sectoral roundtables, which will also take place in Brazil, India, Kenya, and Pakistan.

Whilst the issue of violence against children has gained more attention in Sri Lanka, this roundtable discussion has positively contributed to the narrative by bringing into the picture the importance of nurturing values and spirituality in children, as well as encouraging a holistic approach to the issue, involving faith leaders, community leaders, participants from diverse backgrounds and minority groups, as well as government

agencies, civil society organizations, and child-focused organisations.

The event was organized by the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence against Children and its international and local partners, led by Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, in collaboration with Chinmaya Mission, Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, The Hindu Women's Society, Naleemiah Institute, UNICEF, Walpola Rahula Institute and World Vision Sri Lanka.



OPENING CEREMONY



Mr. Chamindha Rajakaruna (Executive Director, Sarvodaya) welcomed religious dignitaries and other Roundtable participants, representing diverse faiths, regions, institutions, and professions.

The oil lamp was lit by Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne, Ms. Neetha Ariyaratne, Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne, Dr.

Hemamal Jayawardena, Rt. Rev. Duleep De Chickera, Ven. Galkande Dhammananda, Ash Sheik S. H. M. Faleel, Swami Gutitananda, Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, Dr. Nilmini Hemachandra, and Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe, Ms. Kavitha Vijayraj, and Ms. Masue Suzuki.

OPENING REMARKS



DR. VINYA ARIYARATNE

Thanking participants for accepting Sarvodaya's invitation, Dr. Ariyaratne opened the session and stated that **the purpose of the Roundtable was to initiate an inter-faith dialogue on how spirituality can be leveraged to end violence against children and ensure their well-being.** Whilst referring to a recent case involving a child victim of violence that gained national attention, Dr. Ariyaratne pointed to the glaring disconnect between the practice of four major religious traditions in the country which promote nonviolence and the increasing trend of violence against children. In a context where religious

doctrine has been misrepresented in some instances, and even used to defend harmful practices, this Roundtable was organized to discuss how different faith communities and institutions can work together to address this issue.

The Roundtable aims to identify strategies at community, regional, and national levels and connect to international processes to end violence against children.

DISCUSSION - PART I

MS. MARÍA LUCÍA URIBE

Drawing on many years of global work on children's issues, Ms. Uribe explained the work of the **International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence against Children** that Arigatou International convened last year. The Consortium members consist of faith-based organizations, civil society organizations, multilateral agencies, and academia, who aim to mobilize religious communities to work with partners to support the creation of safe childhood environments, where parents and caregivers nurture young children's spirituality and values. Rev. De Chickera serves as independent expert and Sarvodaya, UNICEF and World Vision, among others, are members of the Consortium.

"In the past five years, there has been greater attention and increased investments in early childhood, given that these years constitute the critical formative period when rapid brain development takes place."

Ms. Uribe stated that the thematic core of these discussions is about supporting parents and other caregivers in creating



Ms. María Lucía Uribe, Director, Arigatou International - Geneva.

safe and loving environments that foster respect for the dignity of the child and allow children to build positive relationships and realize their full potential. In the past five years, there has been **greater attention and increased investments in early childhood**, given that these years constitute the critical formative period when rapid brain development takes place. This is when children begin to make emotional connections and develop values such as compassion and empathy. This calls to attention the importance of the environment in which the child grows – the home and extended family, schools, religious communities, social spaces, as well as the policies and legal frameworks that shape their socio-economic environments. Ms. Uribe recalled **the African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child"**, which **underlines the importance of multiple**

caregivers, figures of authority, support, and safe spaces that contribute to shaping childhoods and also highlights the need to ensure safe and nurturing childhood environments.

Ms. Uribe explained that **the initial years of life are particularly significant to a child's spiritual development.** It is children's experiences during this period that create the foundations for their ethical values: empathy, respect for those who are different, a sense of responsibility, non-violence, generosity, resilience, and more. Violence - including structural violence and poverty - distorts children's innate sense of awe. Early childhood is when children develop a sense of interconnectedness, such as in the African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu ("I am because you are"). Violence destroys children's capacities to trust and make positive connections with others.

How can cultures and environments of violence be challenged and transformed? Ms. Uribe stated that given their moral

authority, religious leaders are key stakeholders in this regard. The Consortium facilitates inter-religious collaboration to this end, with a multi-sectorial approach involving governments, academia, international agencies, civil society actors, and many other actors. **A key focus of the Consortium to encourage legal and policy changes in order to reverse the normalization of violence against children.**

To this effect, the Consortium is engaged in raising awareness on the importance of nurturing spirituality in early childhood and challenging the cultural and social norms that condone violence, as well as sharing good practices of religious communities. The Consortium is also engaged in building evidence and developing programs that promote effective practices and the integration of values and spirituality in early childhood programs. **The Consortium is in the process of holding a series of meetings across the world to build an inter-faith collaboration to end childhood violence.**



PROF. SAVITRI GOONESEKERE

“Violence and intolerance are pervasive across families and homes, schools, communities, and nations.”

Prof. Goonesekere pointed to the **urgent challenges confronting religious leaders and communities**, in a context of growing hatred and violence in the name of religion, and the need for religious leaders to reclaim the peaceful practice of faith and rebuild a society based on values. Violence and intolerance are pervasive across families and homes, schools, communities, and nations.

Prof. Goonesekere noted the inter-generational connectivity in violence, where **children who have violence inflicted upon them become adult perpetrators of violence**. All religious doctrines, on the other hand, emphasize that where there is love in the heart, there will be peace and non-violence in families, leading to order in nations and peace in the world.

Commenting on the Sri Lankan tendency to disregard anything of international origin, as a rejection of Westernization, **Prof. Goonesekere reiterated the need to be cognizant of international processes**, such as the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children, chaired by the Executive Director of UNICEF.



Prof. Savitri Goonesekere, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Colombo. Jurist, academic, expert on the rights of women and children.

Because of its positive track record with children, including through social welfare interventions in health and education, Sri Lanka has been chosen as a pathfinder nation to determine effective responses to these issues that might be replicated elsewhere.

Prof. Goonesekera also explained the **INSPIRE strategies**, which have been developed based on international experience and the best available evidence, and which have shown success in reducing violence against children. **The strategies are: the 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.**

These strategies reflect the recent shift in the way in which international organizations approach children's issues. The approach has now become more holistic and recognizes that the childhood environment



“No figure of authority, including teachers and clergy, should be entitled to immunity when it comes to child abuse.”

is the basis for adulthood, rather than the previously limited focus on child health and education. This signals the centrality of protection rights. Having ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Sri Lanka is committed to making interventions to ensure childhood well-being.

With this in mind, Prof. Goonesekere suggested the following key priorities for Sri Lanka. Although domestic violence has been criminalized, very little has been done to address violence in schools, namely with issues such as corporal punishment, sexual abuse, and child-on-child violence.

Currently, there is no mechanism to address this issue (the National Child Protection Authority has had limited success) and this must be flagged as an urgent area for policy, intervention, and monitoring. No figure of authority, including teachers and clergy, should be entitled to immunity when it comes to child abuse. **Even when a child comes from a peaceful home environment, when the school is marked by a culture of violence, the child is influenced by this alternative pattern of behavior and response.** Thus, violence in schools is a strong contributor to social violence.

VEN. GALKANDE DHAMMANANDA

“Seeing perpetrators through this lens allows the opportunity for restorative, instead of retributive justice.”

Ven. Dhammananda stated that the phenomenon of violence is explained in Buddhism as the conditional genesis (or dependent origination) theory, which examines cause and effect. **This theory explains violence as a chain of causes that create violent results.** It is in this sense that he suggested that adults must first reflect upon themselves as part of the chain of causes creating violence. A practical way viewing perpetrators of violence is to view them as wounded human beings. Adults must also reflect upon the narratives transmitted to children, such as Mahavamsa which is taught to children as history and transmits fear of the “other” directly to children.

Children learning in this manner then become fearful toward “the other”, whether in terms of race, religion, or other differences. Similarly, violence during colonial times has resulted in a legacy of fear and suspicion of outsiders in the country. **Religious leaders can play a significant role in developing counter-narratives for healing and building trust between people.** For instance, Rev. De



Ven. Galkande Dhammananda, Founder, Walpola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies.

Chickera acknowledged the violence inflicted by Christian colonization in the country, while Ven. Dhammananda, as a Buddhist leader, had apologized for the violence of the 1983 pogrom against Tamils. Therefore, adults must first heal themselves and apologize for the wounds inflicted upon one another in the name of religion, before the entire cycle of violence can begin to be put to a halt.

Seeing perpetrators through this lens allows the opportunity for restorative, instead of retributive justice.

Ven. Dhammananda explained Buddhism’s view of children as a whole person and not an extension of their parents. The children come through the parent, but not from the parent, and the child’s individuality is to be respected. 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. As for parenting, Buddha also leads by example of his interactions with his son, Rahula. Further, Ven. Dhammananda argued that “loving kindness” meditation can be used as a tool to inculcate empathy and non-violence.

“The importance of extending love and kindness to strangers must be reiterated to children.”

Meditation is practiced step by step, first with breathing and a quiet mind, starting with a focus on within, and then is extended to focusing on those around us, those who are indifferent to us, and finally to those who one is in conflict with. These third and fourth levels of meditation are very important when it comes to working with children. **The importance of extending love and kindness to strangers must be reiterated to children.**

This can be explained in that strangers may be indifferent to us today, but they could become our children’s neighbor in the future and if they are happy and protected, the child can also be happy and protected. It is this “interconnectedness” that is important in the third level of meditation. In the fourth level of meditation, it is toward people with whom one is in conflict and disagreement with. If this person is middle

aged, imagine them as a 5 year-old child.

It is easier for many people to extend their love and kindness to a 5 year-old child and try to understand what could have happened in their childhood and adulthood for them to become who they are today. It is easy to imagine that perhaps there was lack of love, bullying, poverty, etc.

Finally, Ven. Dhammananda emphasized the importance for children to interact with others. **It is critical for children to learn about the notion of “I am because you are”**, which also relates to the notion of Ubuntu.



RT. REV. DULEEP DE CHICKERA

Rev. De Chickera drew attention to the **tendency of romanticizing religion as a panacea for social injustice**. This belies the historical and present-day violence which occurs within and between religions, including the sexual exploitation of children, and the fact that some religious institutions and religious leaders are among the perpetrators. Rev. De Chickera argued that this tendency must be modified to reflect this reality.

As Jesus states, **one must first engage in self-criticism before social critique**. Jesus said “do not worry about the speck of sawdust in the other person’s eye, take note of the plank in your eye.” There must be accountability in religious institutions which should be communicated in the privacy of religious spaces (whether in Sunday schools, daham pasalas, or madrasas). **A great deal of violence is taught in faith community schools, including the supremacy of one’s own religion, and therefore ethnicity, and the insignificance of others**. The divide created with the other is the “enemy syndrome,” where others are then blamed for the downfalls of society.

Rev. de Chickera called on all religions and religious institutions to engage in self-scrutiny and regulation and to banish all elements of violence that are directly



Rt. Rev. Duleep de Chickera, Former Bishop, Anglican Diocese of Colombo, Church of Ceylon Diocese of Colombo.

or indirectly passed onto children. He also called on curriculum reform to introduce norms and values that inculcate the notion that “others are as valuable as I am”.

Progress will only be made once the interdependence of all human beings is acknowledged. Steps must also be taken to learn about other faith traditions in faith schools, in order to teach children that there are universal values and notions such as non-violence, meditation, fasting, and the concept of loving thy neighbor that are shared throughout all religions.

As for the image of the child in Christianity, **Jesus said that children are the most important in the Kingdom of God**. Jesus places a child in the midst of adults who are quarreling about greatness and says that they must learn to be like the child if they want to become members of the Kingdom of God. Reflecting on the current situation of violence against children in Sri Lanka, the Christian perspective sees a **radical reversal of the power dynamic between the adult and child**. It is crucial to recognize



that the child already has spirituality that adults are able to learn from them. **The child's spirituality is being hindered by the violence inflicted upon the child by parents and caretakers.**

Rev. De Chickera suggested an early warning system, where a religious leader could make use of pastoral visits to homes to recognize the signs that a child is at risk of violence. However, there would need to be strict limits on the extent of such interventions by religious leaders who would need to be equipped to make referrals.

In addition, **Rev. de Chickera suggested practicing mindfulness in schools.** Although its roots are in the Dhamma, followers of all religions can subscribe to

mindfulness as a meditative way of life and as a strategy to curb the culture of violence (as exemplified by the recent viral video of a school rugby coach assaulting a player). **Teachers must be trained to respond to crises and provocations in non-violent ways.**

Although these are not instant remedies, people of religion in pursuit of truth are called upon to drive change for this more positive future for children and for the world.

SWAMI GUTITANANDA

“When a parent resorts to violence in disciplining their child, an opportunity for good parenting is being missed.”

Swami Gutitananda explained that from the Hindu perspective, the purpose of spirituality is to guide individuals with the right values so that they are able to avoid experiencing misery and sorrow as well as avoid inflicting it upon others. **What are the values that could prevent violence?** In Hinduism, values are categorized as divine (nonviolence, freedom, purity, love, non-covetousness, modesty, selflessness, etc.) that breed harmony and welfare, and demonic (hatred, indifference, greed, anger, violence, arrogance, etc.) that breed violence and other evils. Such values are acquired through two methods, via imitation or knowledge. The former is the primary means of acquisition for most animals, including children and adults. Behavioral changes occur in children through the imitation of their role models.

When a parent resorts to violence in disciplining their child, an opportunity for good parenting is being missed. This also entails ignorance on the parent’s behalf on other means to handle such situations. Lack of self-discipline and knowledge, in addition to perversion, are among the root causes of such parenting. The Hindu perspective on



Swami Gutitananda, Resident Acharya, Chinmaya Mission, Sri Lanka.

good parenting claims that parents should be living examples of divine values, seeing as children learn values and behavior by imitating their elders.

One of the two aspects of leading by example is to indulge children with love, kindness, care, and compassion. This will result in creating a space for mutual attention by both parents and the children. **The second aspect is for parents to behave how they expect their child to behave.** If this mutual attention is based on mutual love and devotion, the need to use violent means to discipline children would be eliminated. Swami Gunatitananda emphasized the importance of creating such environments in early childhood.

Peer to peer violence is yet another source of violence against children. Inculcating positive and divine values in early childhood would prevent children from becoming perpetrators of violence against their peers. These values inculcated in early childhood will break the vicious cycle of violence



being passed down from one generation to another, where children become perpetrators of violence as adults when they grow up.

Swami Gutitananda elaborated on the following challenges to good parenting from the Hindu perspective: world economic development and modern life has not led to inner growth but an increase in negative values, such as selfishness, individualism, and arrogance; violence is desensitized through constant media depictions. Parents are focused on economic pursuits and do not spend enough time with their children, leading to a mere superficial attachment. **Swami Gutitananda concluded that good parenting is an uphill, but achievable, battle for which guidance is provided through scriptural wisdom.**

ASH SHEIK S. H. M. FALEEL

Ash Sheikh stated that, according to the Quran, children are to be considered a gift from God (hiba), an adornment of life (zeenah), a great blessing (ni'imah), a mercy of Lord (rahma), and a protector, friend, one who carries legacy (walee). By using these deep meaningful words to describe children, **the Holy Qur'an clearly holds the view that children are not only a gift but also a delight and consolation in this world.**

Qur'anic guidance is very explicit when it comes to the parenting and childcare, giving the utmost value and respect for children. There is no space whatsoever for any form of abuse or violence against children.

"The Qur'an teaches us to maintain two fundamental principles with regards to children:

1. One must always approach children with the utmost respect and dignity.

2. One should deal with children with utmost love and care."

These approaches are effective, even towards misbehaving children. The intention of these principles is clearly the prevention of violence against children including neglect, physical abuse, psycho-social abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse.



Ash Sheik S. H. M. Faleel, Head of Academic Programs and Senior Lecturer, Jamiah Naleemiah-Institution for Islamic Higher Studies.

Discipline should always be carried out through the form of counseling, an encounter mediated through **mutual love, respect, and trust**, rather than a harsh, unloving, disrespectful encounter.

Recent studies show that sexual abuse is one of the common forms of child abuse. Islam has seriously considered this problem and has given instructions to its followers to take precautions by establishing a culture to prevent sexual abuse and violence.

Islam has laid very clear restrictions on relationships between males and females, including free interactions between sexes. There is also a very clear code of conduct in dealing with children when it comes to privacy (Ver. 58 of Chap.30).

In today's society, the absence of discipline and a strict code of conduct, especially in relation to the child's privacy and sexuality, and the availability of pornography and sexually charged media content, including films, have made it difficult to adhere to these

codes of conduct, therefore contributing to the increase of sexual violence against children.

In relation to this, **Islam has emphasized the significance of a strong family unit as a platform for protecting children from exposure to abuse and violence.** Family is a fundamental platform that supports the growth and development of the child. Studies have revealed that the deterioration of a family bond and the destruction of a family unit often expose children to abuse and violence. Unfortunately, at times modern society moves away from marriage and building a family bond, which impacts the notion and institution of the family. This shift has had a significant impact on children.

Finally, **Qur'anic solutions for these issues are presented in the concept of "Wisdom Parenting"**. This concept is widely discussed in the Holy Qur'an and particularly in the chapter of Luqman. In this passage, it is advised to bring children up based on the principles of counseling, which means to discuss the fundamental principles of life and living with God, and to live in consciousness and to care for others.

Sheikh Faleel pointed to the important role that religious leaders can play in safeguarding children and suggested bringing such discussions to the grassroots level for further action.

The Qur'an explains steps of parenting through some examples:

- Step 1 - Making a project plan even before the birth of a child, during pregnancy period. The Qur'an describes the planning of Maryams' mother in chapter 3, in verse 35: "Remember when the wife of Imran said Oh my lord, I have vowed to you what is in my womb (child) to be dedicated for your services free from all worldly work to serve your place of worship so accept from this me."
- Step 2 - Fostering the child and nurturing the best qualities in them. It is said in chapter 3, verse 37: "So, her Lord accepted her with goodly acceptance he made her grow in good manner."
- Step 3 - Guiding the child through a "mentorship": The Qur'an reminds in chapter 3, verse 37: "And he put under the care of Zakariyya."

DISCUSSION MAJOR POINTS



- The Sati Pasala Foundation, founded by Ven. U. Dhammajiva, **has had positive results in teaching meditation** to schoolchildren, teachers, parents, and communities across the island. Following a multi-religious paradigm, the Sati Pasala campaign has proven effective as both a preventative and rehabilitation response to social issues.
- **There is a gap between scripture and practice**, as the clergy, no less than laypeople, are susceptible to thanhawa, or greed for power and wealth. Religious leaders themselves may be perpetrators of violence.
- **It was stressed that religious leaders and members of their communities must interact with people of other faith traditions** in their local neighborhoods, to continue this dialogue on ending violence against children and nurturing values and spirituality.
- **Religious leaders must address social issues, such as violence in the home, in their preaching.**
- Although the greater use of technology (for instance, the ubiquitous mobile phone, computers, and so on) may desensitize children to images of violence, **it is important to teach children the safe and responsible use of technology.** Since it is impossible to banish technology altogether from our daily lives, we must equip children with the skills and judgment to protect themselves. Sarvodaya is active in this area.

DISCUSSION - PART II

DR. NILMINI HEMACHANDRA

Dr. Hemachandra's presentation laid out the scientific basis for the importance of early childhood in shaping values and spirituality. The broad strokes of development established in the embryo through the child's genetic blueprint are subsequently shaped by environmental factors during the critical early years of life.

The most rapid cognitive development takes place in the first 3 years after birth. Therefore the mother's health and well-being prior to and during pregnancy, as well as the conditions and environment during infancy and childhood, influence the development of physical, intellectual, emotional, social capacities.

In late pregnancy, the baby's brain starts to form synaptic connections; in the months after birth, the brain makes 1,000-10,000

Dr. Nilmini Hemachandra, National Professional Officer, Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) & Nutrition, World Health Organization.



connections every second, reaching a peak by the age of 3 and steadily declining from this point.

Sensory, language, and higher cognitive function pathways peak within the first 11 months or so. This happens through exposure to caring, affection, various sensory experiences, relationship formations, etc.

"As babies get older, their brains begin to eliminate rarely used pathways and reinforce those that are frequently used. Consequently, who we become is determined in the very early years of life."

Infants need many positive, nurturing experiences at the time when their brains are most pliable. Parents have a massive responsibility in this, since this vital period is largely spent in the home.

Globally, an estimated 1 billion children between the ages of 2-17 are subjected to physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect every day. Such abuse has devastating consequences: death, severe injury, impaired brain and nervous system development, negative coping mechanisms and high-risk behavior, early sexual activity and unintended pregnancies, etc. Thus, experiencing violence in early childhood frequently has effects throughout an individual's lifetime.

DR. HEMAMAL JAYAWARDENA

Dr. Jayawardena showed a video widely circulated on social media of the recent incident during a school rugby game in which a coach was seen to reprimand one of his players, who was sent off the field for violence, by assaulting him. As apparent here, **discipline is frequently merely a cover for the violent exercise of rage**; therefore, when a child is subjected to such punishment, they learn that violence is a natural and appropriate reaction to feelings of anger.

Building on the previous presentation, Dr. Jayawardena said that numerous studies (by, for example, WHO, UNICEF, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and others) have shown decreased synapse formation in the brain (i.e. less cognitive development) in children growing up in constant fear in violent, abusive environments.

“When a child is subjected to such punishment, they learn that violence is a natural and appropriate reaction to feelings of anger.”

Research shows that 80% of Sri Lankan parents resort to some degree of physical chastisement. However, beating children is an outdated practice – although considered “part of our culture,” said Dr. Jayawardena, it is a practice introduced during the British colonial period. Since then, norms concerning



Dr. Hemamal Jayawardena, Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF.

what is acceptable in disciplining children have radically changed. **Discipline should take place through positive parenting**, for instance by praise and reinforcement of “good” behavior, responses, and attitudes in the child. Dr. Jayawardena pointed out that the clergy might help to raise awareness on the dangers of inflicting violence on children.

Dr. Jayawardena explained the INSPIRE strategy which is a set of interventions proven to be effective in reducing violence against children. He explained that the acronym INSPIRE refers to the interventions:

1. Implementation and enforcement of laws.
2. Changing social norms and beliefs that support violence. As an example, Dr. Jayawardena contested the notion that corporal punishment is a part of local culture, when in fact it reflects disciplinary practices in schools during the Victorian era in Britain which were introduced to colonial Ceylon. Therefore, the norm



that beating children is acceptable must be overturned.

3. **S**afe environments.
4. **P**arent and caregiver support, including through raising parental awareness and knowledge about the dangers of corporal punishment.
5. **I**ncome and economic strengthening. It has been shown that parents may take out the frustrations and pressures of making ends meet through violent behavior against their children. Conversely, reducing the economic burden on parents decreases the risk of violence against children in the home.
6. **R**esponse and support to child victims.
7. **E**ducation and life-skills for children.

Moreover, during early years, parents must take care to reduce children's passive screen time with the TV, computers, mobile phones, and other devices, in favor of activities that provide sensory richness and cognitive stimulation. On the other hand, **Dr. Jayawardena cautioned parents against pressuring the child to acquire skills.** The acquirement of skills level out at a certain age, regardless of children's individual pathways and pace of learning.

DISCUSSION MAJOR POINTS

- **A national training programme on psychosocial well-being for teachers and parents** will shortly be launched to challenge school violence by Stop Child Cruelty (NGO) with the Ministry of Education, who is also formulating a national training module on psychosocial well-being and positive discipline.
- **The need for comprehensive sex education was mentioned by one of the participants.** Sex education is not limited to information about contraceptives and should include knowledge about gender; messages about accepting those who are different; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, and inter-sex (LGBTQI) rights; the concept of consent; how to recognize abuse; the fact that there are laws that protect children from abuse; to whom the child should report abuse; messages against bullying, etc. Giving children knowledge empowers them, and it is necessary to advocate with the Ministry of Education on the need for sex education for young children, starting from grade 5.
- **A participant raised the point that in some teachers' experiences, corporal punishment facilitates learning.** In response it was noted that there is nothing in Buddhist doctrine that endorses corporal punishment of children, and that teachers must find a non-violent response in demanding situations where children seem to resist learning. Furthermore, **when a teacher must resort to corporal punishment to compel a child to learn, the teacher must find ways to address their own inability to teach rather than take out their frustration on the student.**
- The principle aim of the discussion was **to find alternatives to corporal punishment, creative ways of persuading children to learn and change behavior,** seeing as beating a child is an expression of the adult's rage.
- **Parents require support to acquire the skills to parent in loving and nurturing ways** that ensure the child's dignity and help them build positive connections with those around them.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS - MAJOR POINTS



Participants were assigned to small groups to discuss a specific question. The following insights and conclusions were presented at the end of the session.

QUESTION 1:

In your opinion, what are some of the hindering and supporting factors in nurturing values and spirituality in the family and school settings?

Hindering factors include:

- A mother's stress and lack of well-being during the pregnancy period (including stresses arising from the relationship between the parents).
- Abuse and neglect of the child.

- Excessive parental pressure on children to accumulate scholastic achievements ("where school becomes an experience equivalent to a prison"), including by compelling children to take numerous tuition classes outside school hours, and encouraging a competitive attitude towards their peers.
- "Parenting through technology" (i.e. to keep children distracted with tv or other technology, instead of parents engaging with their children).
- Not creating opportunities for children to interact with the natural world

Supporting factors include:

- Talking to the child in the womb.
- A loving relationship between parents.

- Talking with the child and encouraging her/him to communicate.
- Respecting the child's individuality.
- Encouraging the child's creativity.
- Teaching the child how to be content.
- Teaching empathy, tolerance, respect of different people.
- Teaching mindfulness.

QUESTION 2:

What can religious communities do to support parents, families, caregivers, and teachers so that young children can grow in safe, caring, and loving environments, free of violence?

1. Children should be taught **where to find help** in case they fall victim to violence.
2. Religious **leaders should be role models** (and should not engage in politics).
3. Religious leaders should **engage more with their communities**.
4. Religious institutions and leaders should be **held accountable in protecting young children**.
5. Parents and teachers require training on how to nurture, teach, and discipline children **without resorting to corporal punishment**.

6. Sunday school teaching needs to **focus on values and spirituality**.
7. **Facilitate more inter-religious dialogue** on encouraging values and spirituality.

QUESTION 3:

What social norms and beliefs that condone violence against children in early years do you think should be challenged, and how?

Norms and beliefs:

- "I was beaten as a child, and I turned out fine."
- "If a child is not beaten, they won't learn."
- Children should be obedient.
- Children have no right to speak against their parents'/teachers'/adults' views.
- "As parents, we have the moral right and authority to discipline our children in any way we deem acceptable."





- The father as the threatening parent who dispenses punishments (as a result, fear is inculcated in the child very early through such a disciplinary strategy. It was further explained that the father's dominance over the family in this manner teaches children gender roles where masculinity is associated with violence).
- The culture of caning in schools.

Challenging these norms and beliefs:

- Use social media and TV.
- Reduce exam pressure.
- Parents need to spend quality time with children, build mutual respect, and accept children as individuals.
- Parents need to listen respectfully to their children's views (even when the

adult disapproves or doesn't agree with the child's opinion).

- Create awareness about the depth and richness of children's spirituality.
- Promote awareness of child development and abuse.
- Strengthen laws against child abuse and neglect.
- Set up and raise awareness about hotlines that children can call in cases of abuse.
- Promote spiritual healing for adults.
- Encourage dialogue between children, families, and teachers.
- Challenge the punishment culture in schools.

QUESTION 4:

What can faith-based organizations, civil society organizations, and schools do to challenge violence against children in early years? How can they collaborate with religious communities?

1. **Raise awareness** about children's worth.
2. **Teach parents and teachers how to communicate with children** with kindness, especially when intervening to correct a child's actions and responses.
3. **Encourage dialogue** among teachers, parents, and children to minimize the pressures on children in education.

QUESTION 5:

What recommendations do you have to continue this dialogue and promote the role of religious communities in creating loving, respectful, and empowering environments for children?

1. **Create a child-friendly environment** at home, in schools, and in places of worship.
2. **Children need to be taught about other faiths**, transcending the borders between Sunday school, the madrasa, the daham pasala, etc.
3. **We must be open** to questioning within our own faith communities and institutions.

4. **Allow children to ask questions** and express themselves.
5. **Build awareness of the value of children** and the harmful effects of violence against children in religious preaching.
6. **Take this discussion to the periphery** (beyond Colombo, by enabling more inter-faith discussions such as this one).



CONCLUSIONS



Ms. Uribe expressed hope that this Roundtable serves as an invitation for self-reflection to be carried on within families, workplaces, and faith-based communities, instead of waiting for external plans and strategies to create change. The deliberations of this meeting will be encapsulated in an advocacy booklet to be used at the community level.

Ms. Uribe then thanked Sarvodaya, and representatives from WHO, UNICEF, Sati Pasala, the Walpola Rahula Institute, and all other partners for their contributions towards an enriching dialogue.

Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne thanked the members of clergy and other participants for their enthusiasm and active engagement in the discussions. This dialogue must be continued across the various regions, villages,

districts, and communities. He thanked the participants for their commitment to children.

Dr. Ariyaratne concluded by expressing his appreciation for Arigatou International and the International Consortium on Nurturing Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence, and the Sarvodaya team for their untiring efforts behind the scenes.



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**“May every day find every
one of us continually
embraced in growing peace”**

—Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President of Arigatou
International, September 21, 2015

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