

Strengthening Families to Foster Ethical Values and Nurture Spirituality in Early Childhood

– The Role of Religious Communities

Rationale

The family is the most important place where children and youth learn the foundations of respect, empathy, solidarity, and to trust one another. In early childhood, children learn not only physical and cognitive skills, but also social and emotional skills, such as sharing, resolving conflict without violence, managing their own emotions, and their ability to form and maintain respectful relations with others, which are the foundations for learning and well-being. Families have a strong role to play as guarantors of the rights of the child. Art. 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for their own physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development, and that the parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.

Families, schools and religious communities need to become safe environments for children’s sound and healthy development. A safe environment nurtures the brain and allows children to learn about life and trust of others, in addition to improve their well-being. “It is during early years that the child’s brain architecture is developing most rapidly, habits are formed, differences are recognized and emotional ties are built through positive social relationships and day to day interactions in homes and neighborhoods[[1]](#footnote-1).

The 2013 Report on Ending Corporal Punishment of Children confirmed through numerous studies that children who have experienced corporal punishment are more likely to be aggressive towards their peers and parents, to bully and to experience violence from their peers and to use violent methods to resolve conflict.

The report also highlights that corporal punishment can ensure immediate compliance from children but in the long term is associated with poor moral internalization of behaviors, low empathy and with negative behaviors such as bullying, lying, cheating, running away, truancy, school behavior problems and involvement in crime as a child and young adult.

According to the most recent UNICEF report, close to 300 million (3 in 4) children aged 2 to 4 worldwide experience violent discipline by their caregivers on a regular basis; and 250 million children (around 6 in 10) are punished by physical means. Countless young children are victims of harmful practices every year, including female genital mutilation.

Violence against children does not only violate children’s physical and emotional wellbeing but also their spiritual safety and development, as it breaks their connections with others and their sense of trust and respect for other human beings.

Religious leaders can play a critical role in helping to create safe environments for children, challenging social and cultural norms that justify violence against children, and self-examining their own theological interpretations that can influence the upbringing of the child and their identity formation.

Religious leaders are well positioned to support families and caregivers in the creation of family environments free of violence, and the use of parenting practices that are conducive to the healthy development of the child, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. They can support fostering values such as non-violence, empathy, respect and compassion towards others. One way to do so is through religious narratives and teachings that contribute to the positive representations of others, and help preventing problems of alienation and inter-communal violence. In the context of increasing cultural and religious diversity in the world, children need to learn from early years about their connectedness to others and their obligation to care for one another.

There are, however, multiple factors at play that influence parents abilities to be responsive caregivers, capable of providing a positive upbringing and nurturing ethical values and pro-social behaviors. Some of these factors are, for example, social norms in the community about what “good parenting” means, as well as cultural and religious values and beliefs that influence parents’ expectations about how they think they should raise their children and how their children should behave. Underpinning these more immediate factors, are structural and society issues such as: poverty, societal violence, conflict, emergencies, displacements that are risk factors for increased levels of family stress, domestic violence, time, and depression among caregivers[[2]](#footnote-2). Tackling these issues would require multi-sectorial interventions and collaborations between several actors.

In 2016, the World Health Organization developed INSPIRE: a select group of strategies that have shown success in reducing violence against children.  These proved strategies include challenging norms and values that justify violence against children as well as providing support to parents and caregivers.

There is evolving evidence that suggests harmful social norms and attitudes can be changed by strengthening norms and values that support non-violent, respectful, nurturing, positive and gender equitable relationships for all children and adolescents[[3]](#footnote-3). Religious communities can engage in formal advocacy, but perhaps their most powerful role is in facilitating dialogue, reflection and action regarding violence and rights violations within their cultural and religious context. By organizing and engaging communities to examine the violence perpetrated, and by fostering a collective vision of ideals and alternatives, social change brings commitments and behaviour in line with human rights standards[[4]](#footnote-4).

Nurturing, protecting, promoting and supporting children in their early years is essential for the transformation that the world seeks to achieve in the next 15 years guided by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This initiative aims to contribute to Target 4.2, to ‘ensure that all girls and boys have access to good-quality early childhood development, as well to Target 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children, thus contributing to peaceful and inclusive societies.

Ethics Education for Children

Arigatou International Geneva through its Ethics Education Initiative has been since 2003 working to nurture values and ethics to empower children in order to create a world of greater justice, peace and dignity. It envisions a world in which all children are empowered to develop their spirituality — embracing ethical values, learning to live in solidarity with people of different religions and civilizations, and building faith in the Divine Presence.

The Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, consisting of people of faith, educators and experts on child rights, ethics, interfaith dialogue and peace building, is mandated to foster nurturing spirituality in children — including ethical values and respect for people of different religions, convictions, cultures and civilizations— an essential part of the “quality education” pledged in the Special Session Outcome Document, “A World Fit for Children”.

The educational manual *Learning to Live Together,* launched in collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF in 2008, is a first tangible outcome in implementing this commitment. Even though the educational approach for ethics education is applicable to all ages, this manual is mostly an instrument for work with children and youth aged 12 – 18 in formal and non-formal educational settings; whereas this new initiative attempts to explore the role of religious communities in supporting families to foster ethics and nurturing spirituality in early childhood, as a contribution to end violence against children.

Follow up to the GNRC Fifth Forum, Panama

The Global Network of Religions for Children, GNRC, which was initiated by Arigatou International, organizes a Global Forum every five years. In May 2017, the Fifth Forum of the GNRC took place in Panama under the topic: Ending Violence Against Children – Faith Communities in Action. The forum brought together more than 500 participants including religious leaders, government, United Nations, and civil society representatives, as well as children and youth. The Forum produced a declaration that commits participants to double their efforts to end violence against children. The Declaration recalls: “children thrive and grow in trusting relationships with people who love and care for them. Ideally, and for the most part, this happens within families. Sadly, it also cannot be denied that the home is the place where most abuses occur. Families need support to grow to become peaceful, safe sanctuaries.”

It continues by affirming that “transformed religious and spiritual communities can offer moral teachings and model practices to prevent, heal, reduce and ultimately end violence against children.”

Strengthening Families to Foster Ethical Values and Nurture Spirituality in Early Childhood – The Role of Religious Communities, is a contribution towards achieving the Panama Declaration, particularly towards the commitments related to strengthen local communities by offering education in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy, become more resilient, and grow spiritually; as well as to identify and challenge patriarchal structures and practices that perpetuate violence against and sexual exploitation especially of girls.

International Consortium – Terms of Reference

An international consortium will be launched in June 2018 with organizations working on early childhood development, faith-based organizations and religious communities.

Goal

The Consortium aims to foster collaboration to share good practices and develop evidence-based and interfaith approaches in religious communities and from the work of faith-based organizations that contribute to end violence in early childhood, challenging social and cultural norms that justify it and supporting families to nurture values and spirituality in children.

Objectives

1. Awareness raising

To raise awareness and provide information, among and with religious communities and leaders, on the impact of violence on early childhood, as well as the importance and successful ways of supporting families in fostering ethical values and nurture spirituality in children, as a violence prevention mechanism.

1. Evidence base

To expand the knowledge base and research on the topic of ethical values and spirituality in the development of children’s identities and in the creation of nurturing environments, as a contribution to the prevention of violence. The research will look into the role of religious communities and the effectiveness of interventions.

1. Grassroots-based Advocacy

To work together with religious communities and leaders to challenge cultural and social norms that justify violence against children in the family context.

1. Holistic approaches

To prompt concrete actions and practices in religious communities and faith-based organizations to support families in nurturing ethical values and spirituality in children, accompanied by economic empowerment programs for caregivers, and other holistic interventions that foster a positive environment for children’s development.

Outputs

1. An interfaith material and toolkit on the role of religious communities in supporting families in fostering ethical values and nurturing spirituality in early childhood. The toolkit will include:

1. A booklet that documents theological reflections, good practices and interfaith projects developed by religious communities, faith-based organizations and early childhood development agencies, as well as the voices of children and youth, and recommendations for religious leaders and communities.
2. An interactive webpage that promotes information, resources and knowledge and exchange between religious people, academia and child development experts. The page will contain blogs, videos, materials, and good practices.
3. Evidence of gaps as well as successful practices and interventions on the role of religious communities in fostering ethical values and spirituality that favours the development of children’s identities and that contributes to the prevention of violence in the family.
4. A group of religious leaders, GNRC members and others, committed to use theological reflections, learn new ways to support families to challenge cultural and social norms that justify violence in early childhood.
5. Replicable practices in religious communities that support families to foster values and spirituality in early childhood, complemented by economic empowerment projects for caregivers.

Term

The duration of the Consortium is limited to two years with the possibility to continue upon decision of members.

Membership

The membership has two categories: organizations and individuals.

Organizations: The membership will be diverse representing different religious affiliations, as well as technical expertise, and theological backgrounds. The membership will vary from faith-based organizations, religious communities as well as networks, foundations, academia and civil society organizations with expertise on early childhood development. Each organization must appoint a representative, who should be committed to participate for the duration of the consortium. The representative should be available to participate in the first meeting of the Consortium, tentatively scheduled for end of June – beginning of July 2018.

Individuals: Experts on early childhood development or religious scholars committed to provide inputs and expertise during the two-year period. Availability to participate in the first meeting of the Consortium, tentatively scheduled for end of June – beginning of July 2018.

Organizational Member Criteria

* Interest in contributing to the goals and objectives of the consortium;
* Interest, experience and commitment to the topic of ending violence in early childhood and working collaboratively with religious communities;
* Experience and interest in supporting programs to nurture spirituality in early childhood;
* Willingness and commitment to share expertise, good practices, organize meetings in countries where they operate; utilise lessons learned and promote the toolkit in the organization and with its constituencies and networks;
* Commitment to be part of the consortium for a period of two years;
* Commitment to appoint a person, and an alternate, to represent the organization in the Consortium and assume the costs of his/her participation in Consortium meetings. This includes travel/hotel/per diem costs for attendance of meetings at least once a year as well as time away from regular work;
* Commitment to support the representative to participate and contribute to the consortium activities for an average of three days per month;
* Assistance with fundraising efforts, or through voluntary contributions, such as support to research, hosting meetings, printing of materials, piloting projects, or sponsoring consultants;
* Inability to participate fully over a one-year long period will lead to a dialogue with the secretariat of the Consortium about the appropriateness of the organization’s continuing membership in the consortium.

Whilst the time constrains and resource availability or organizations and individuals is recognized, it is expected that all members will contribute to the work of the group beyond attending meetings to the extent that they are able.

Organisational Representative Criteria (Person)

* Technical expertise on early childhood development, education, child protection or similar;
* Experience working with religious communities;
* Organisational seniority in order to ensure institutional buy-in;
* Skills and expertise in strategy, programme planning and development, carrying out evidence-based research, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy and fundraising;
* Ease and familiarity with working in the English language.

Organisational Representative Responsibilities (Person)

* Participate in the consortium meetings at least once a year;
* Contribute to the development of the activities of the consortium as defined during the first meeting of the consortium;
* Promote the objectives of the Consortium internally within the organisation as well as externally with partners and networks;
* Assist in fundraising efforts, as appropriate;
* Time Commitment. Representatives are expected to attend at least one annual meeting that will last for three days. Additional time will be required for conference calls, e-mail correspondence, and participating in the development of activities of the Consortium. Consortium members will do their work alongside their regular jobs; estimation of this time commitment is approximately two to three days per month.

Potential members of the Consortium

* World Council of Churches
* Aga Khan Foundation
* Islamic Relief Worldwide
* World Vision
* Catholic Relief Services
* International Network of Engaged Buddhists
* Sarvodaya Movement Sri Lanka
* Shanti Ashram India
* Pastoral Da Crianca Brazil
* Global Campaign to End Corporal Punishment
* UNICEF
* Academic Institutions
* (Other religious based networks or organizations)
* Religious communities
* Individual experts

Support/Advice: Office of SRSG on Violence Against Children and Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.

Funding

Members of the Consortium will finance the development of the toolkit as well as the research through its own resources and possibilities. The Secretariat will map grant and funding opportunities. It is expected that the Consortium will apply for funds to further the work. Arigatou International will fund accommodation for the first meeting of the Consortium, and provide some initial seed funding for the development of the toolkit.

Secretariat

Arigatou International will appoint two staff members to support the coordination of the Consortium.

Launch of the Consortium

The first meeting of the Consortium will be held in Geneva, Switzerland at the end of June/beginning of July 2018. A public event on Fostering Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood – The Role of Religious Communities to contribute to End Violence Against Children will be held on the first day. This public event will aim to share good practices from the member organizations, engage in dialogue about the importance, challenges and opportunities in supporting families in fostering values and spirituality in early childhood, and the role of religious communities.

It is expected that members of the consortium will contribute to the development of the program of the event as well as expertise. The discussions and outcomes of the public event will inform the discussions during the meeting of the consortium.

1. UNICEF, Early Childhood and Peacebuilding. UNICEF (Online) 2013. <http://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_69852.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Swan, Melanie. Panel on the Role of Ethics Education in Strengthening Families and Nurturing Spirituality in Children, 11 May 2017. Panama City, Panama. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. WHO, INSPIRE – Seven Strategies for Ending Violence Against Children. Pg. 36. <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/207717/1/9789241565356-eng.pdf?ua=1> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Religions for Peace & UNICEF. From Commitment to Action: What Religious Communities Can Do to Eliminate Violence Against Children. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)