

## [Winning the Hearts of Youth](#)

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IN MY OPINION

## Winning the Hearts of Youth

When teachers become students, learning is fun

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My wife Sushila and I conduct a youth program for teenage Hindus at our local mandir (a Hindu worship center) in Berlin, New Jersey. When we initially volunteered to perform this service in 1994, the program consisted primarily of kids attending academic dissertations presented by respected scholars on topics related to Hindu religion and culture.

Our classes took place from 10 am until twelve noon on the second and fourth Sundays of each month during the school year. Although we were very enthusiastic about our new project, it got off to a very slow start. All too often, my wife and I were the only ones present at the beginning of each morning session. The youth trickled in as late as 11:30 am, and the average class attendance had dropped to about ten kids per session. Those who came did so only because their parents told them to. It was not hard to foresee that this program in its present form would most certainly self destruct within two or three years. We had to do something fast.

First, we tried to understand the problem by understanding the youth. After all, the classes were for them. Here were some of our insights: 1) Young people like to be given incentive; 2) They don't like to be told what to do; 3) They enjoy a free learning environment in which they are encouraged to raise questions and offer feedback, even about the teaching program itself; 4) All youth are not the same--the concerns of older teens, for instance, are far different from those of younger teens.

Keeping all of this in mind, we embarked upon making some fundamental changes to the existing program. They were as follows: We cut the length of the speeches in half, allowing thirty minutes for open discussion. We replaced some lecture sessions with workshops on cooking, arts, crafts, public speaking and more. We gave the youth opportunities to communicate with newcomers and encouraged them to make new friends. We rearranged our classes so that we were all sitting in a circle, instead of in rows. This last change alone solved many communication problems.

With all these modifications, the youth started feeling much better about the program. Actually, they became inspired beyond even our highest expectation. Of their own accord, they began pulling in new class participants with an assortment of innovative recruitment plans including visiting and talking with parents, volunteering to help with youth activities, creating informational booths at local Indian functions, talking to friends at school and communicating with their own parents about what they were doing for the youth program.

My wife and I were so impressed. These kids were really taking the classes to heart and working passionately to help them grow. After a year, the class attendance rose to 85 and included kids as young as twelve years of age. Now, Jain and Sikh children are joining in, and parents are reporting that their children are looking forward to the classes so much that they don't want to miss even a single session.

Today, one of our typical Sunday mornings includes prayer, worship, yoga asanas, religious storytelling, chanting, games and scriptural study.

The most important aspect of conducting a successful youth program is recognizing that teachers are also students. Throughout this process, my wife and I have learned to understand teenagers more deeply by sincerely respecting their views, ideas, thoughts, opinions and feelings. We have also discovered that successful communication with youth is best accomplished by creating a warm environment with few restrictions.

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