

[Parents Are the Key](#)

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EDUCATION

Parents Are the Key

Religious education of children begins with reeducating Mom and Dad

Under the able leadership of Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (BAPS) organization has successfully developed a wide range of programs to teach Hinduism to the next generation. In March, 2005, Hinduism Today's publisher, Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, and managing editor, Sannyasin Arumugaswami, met with the education team of the BAPS Swaminarayan Temple in Neasden--Atmaswarup Swami, the temple head; Yogibhai Patel, class coordinator; Tejas Gandhi, publications coordinator; Devan Parek, youth coordinator; Alpesh Patel, Gujarati teaching administrator; and Lalji Ladwa, head of religious education for the Swaminarayan Independent School. The discussion was candid and, based as it was upon 50 years' experience, provided many useful insights for parents and temple administrators alike seeking to provide a meaningful and lasting Hindu education to their children.

Let me give you a little of our background experience in America, " Atmaswarup Swami said. "Originally the emigrants from our Gujarati community had gone to the United States for dollars. Insurance policies, mortgages, etc.--all that occupied their mind. They borrowed money to go. They were not from rich families or highly educated. They had loans to repay and worked at all sorts of odd jobs to earn dollars. Then they had a family. When the children were young, they were like little puppies, very sweet and all that. But when they grew up, when they came to the teenage level, they started questioning their parents. They started asking many whys. They started questioning the very basics of their existence. Suddenly, some of them went into drugs. That stunned the parents. They said, 'Oh my God, I'm losing my children. What am I doing this for? I'm earning money for what? If my children don't want me, I'm really losing out.' That was the shock effect that really got the Indians back to their roots. They realized they had brought some values to the country, but did not pass them on. Sometimes it was too late, sometimes it was just in the nick of time, that they started to build the temples, study the scriptures, bring the swamis and replicate what was there in India."

Today BAPS has 70 sadhus solely dedicated to children's development worldwide teamed with thousands of volunteer teachers recruited from their membership. They have developed extensive teaching programs supplemented with books, video tapes, CDs and websites. Still, they discovered their efforts with the children required strong parental support. "Without the parents' support," Swami said, "we were not much of a success. Now with the parents' support, the success is much better."

Some parents simply wanted the teachers to raise their children for them, Swami said. But that approach could put the temple's teaching program on Sunday at odds with the parents' own example at home the rest of the week. Yogibhai Patel gave an example of the way parents could work against the temple's efforts: "We were teaching the children to respect their parents," he said, "to bow down and touch their feet. So one of the children went home and did that. His father harshly rebuked him and said, 'What are you trying to do? Don't be too religious.' So it backfired on us. We were teaching something that was good for them, but the parents didn't put much importance on those cultural values." Judging from the chagrined looks of the others at our meeting, this incident had obviously sent shock waves through the organization and provoked a thorough examination of the roll of the parents. They were now looking at not only the parents' examples, but at their general parenting skills.

Beginning two years ago, the temple teamed with a professional organization that offers parenting courses. They have adapted the program of The New Learning Centre in London (<http://www.tnlc.info>) to include the BAPS nine "core values." These are God, guru, niyamas (religious restraints), parents, satsang (religious gatherings), behavior, habits, study and company. The Centre promotes a thoroughly modern approach to child-rearing, firm yet nonviolent. They found it best to focus on parents with children between three and ten. It was difficult, Yogibhai said, to impact the situation with parents of older children.

Yogibhai added, "The parents who attended thought they were going to learn how to straighten their children out. They had to realize they had to straighten themselves out before their children, because the way in which the parents were dealing with the children was wrong. These professionals taught the parents how to deal with the children in the correct manner. So this had a very positive impact on the parents, and the children affected have become much, much better."

"The main purpose in setting up the children's activities is really only to assist the parents in looking after their children, not to take over," Swami explained.

"Sometimes the parents are happy to pass on the whole responsibility to us. The parenting course is a must. Unless you have the parents, your efforts just don't succeed. Parents need to be equally involved. We pass on some values on Sunday, then they spend all week at home, and next Sunday it is back to square one."

Swami then shared how his instructors approach the children, "One of the golden rules that Pramukh Swami has given to these teachers is that you must love the children as though they are your own. With that love you handle them. That will really generate a lot of energy to pass on the values to them. Before you teach the children, you must realize what their needs are. When you address some of their worldly needs, they get interested in the organization. Then you can also pass on the spiritual and cultural values. It is a holistic approach."

The education team explained that the Neasden temple runs a Sunday school for three hours, from 10:00 am to 1:00 pm. This is their main teaching program. The first 45 minutes is called "Children's Forum," encompassing morals, religion and culture. It is followed by 30 minutes of sports and then one hour and a quarter of Gujarati language study, which also includes a significant religious focus. They conduct these classes for nine years, from age 6 to 14. The children do well in their language studies, but, Swamiji lamented, tended to forget Gujarati in their later teens. "They see no economic benefit to retaining it," he said.

Each festival during the year, such as Deepavali, Ramnavami, Janmashtami and Holi, offers additional teaching opportunities, including dance and drama. After witnessing his children in a drama, one parent said, "I never knew until today my children had such talent." The children are encouraged to do volunteer work at the temple, and given major responsibility in the process--an experience that bonds them to the temple, makes them feel they "own" it, as Swami said.

For example, each year on Deepavali day the temple hosts 50,000 visitors. The children are given the task--by themselves--to organize and run the shoe rack. Yogibhai claims it to be the largest in the world. They operate it from 7:00 am to 10:30 pm, with up to 3,000 pairs of shoes at once, and not one is lost by day's end. Such delegation of responsibility has been a successful part of their teaching program.

The temple promotes sports programs for the children and even has a complete gymnasium, near the satsang hall.

As to materials, "children don't like big books," Yogibhai observed. Consequently, the educators worked to produce a large number of smaller items, not only the story books and workbooks, but also videos and CDs which capture the children's attention. One excellent CD was produced entirely by the children themselves. They wanted to present the teachings in Gujarati, but have adapted to the need for English-language material. In part, Swami said, they had studied the kind of teaching materials the Christians were using, adapting, for example, the concept of a children's Bible to create a children's Bhagavad Gita.

Another useful training program was begun in 2004 when groups of children were sent to residential homes for the elderly. There they put on a cultural program with dance, song and speeches, then spent time with the elderly of all the communities of the UK, Indian and non-Indian. They'd ask, "Uncle, do you get a chance to go out? How often do they take you for shopping? Do they take you to a park? Do your children come and visit you?" Swami said, "They got very nice feedback. These elderly people were excited because for the very first time, someone had come to their doorstep to entertain them. These children also went with some gifts for them. One of them confided, 'For the last thirty years I haven't had a gift from anyone.' The children for their part learned that although the residential homes had all the facilities, each one living there felt alone. When they came back, they told us, 'What I learned is that when my parents get older, I will not put them in a residential home. I will take care of them.' "

Yogibhai said they work with the teens to stand up to peer pressure, especially as they move into college. A key, he said, is to convince them that "the Hindu way is the way for the world to move forward, because it is the way that teaches everyone of every background to live harmoniously without conflict."

They also deal creatively with peer pressure of another sort, that created by English festivals, such as New Year's Eve. Instead of trying to keep the youth away from parties, the temple has its own New Year's Eve party for December 31, which the youth plan themselves. "It has nothing to do with Hinduism, but if we do not do this, they will go out to other parties. And in that one party, they can lose all the values they learned in their life. We protect them and entertain them," Swami said.