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EDUCATION

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India's Struggle to Stop Raising and Schooling Children with Physical Punishment. The life of children in three of India's leading Hindu schools reveals that the ancient tradition of big people hitting little people is slowly dying, yet we have far to go in raising and teaching children without violence

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The physical abuse of children around the world has been a way of life for many more years than most of us would care to count. Long established as habit despite the nagging condemnation of conscience, it has been defended in homes and schools alike as the "only way" to control and train disobedient youth. However, times are changing. Religious leaders, social workers, teachers, parents and—most importantly—student youth are now fearlessly speaking out. "Violence is not the only way," they say. And people are listening.

One might assume that Hindus, as staunch adherents of ahimsa, nonviolence, might provide significant leadership toward a more gentle system of child-rearing and education. On assignment from Hinduism Today to better understand if this indeed might be the case, I visited some Hindu

orphanages and educational institutions to conduct interviews and assemble some first-hand assessments of the way students were being treated. These visits were all too revealing.

In New Delhi I called upon Udayan Care, a small but distinguished orphanage/school which houses and trains 35 abandoned children in three homes and plans to double in size by the end of the year. In Rishikesh I visited two extensive Hindu teaching institutions: Parmarth Niketan and Omkarananda Ashrams. Parmarth Niketan runs 127 schools spread over seven states throughout North India, and Omkarananda Ashrams presides over 74 schools and colleges, also in North India. Both Parmarth Niketan and Omkarananda Ashrams are run by reputable swamis and are responsible for the education of literally thousands of young people. All three of these institutions are preeminent in the field of responsible education and are outspokenly keen on abolishing child abuse. They haven't succeeded yet, but they're miles ahead of nearly every other school in India where corporal punishment is just the way things are done.

Investigation revealed that all three institutions were involved in or knew of continuing child abuse right in their classrooms. The severity of this startling reality was magnified by the fact that strict rules had already been set in place to constrain harsh punishments—yet it was going on anyway. The people I spoke to were quite aware of clear-cut instructions made to their principals, teachers and staff that children were not to

be beaten, slapped, verbally abused or forced to assume physically painful positions for long periods of time.

At Udayan Care, counselor-cum-child psychologist Sri Vikram Dutt freely admitted he himself had slapped children. He even went to great lengths in his conversations with me to justify such action. He said that slapping a child with full awareness and consciousness was a very difficult duty but nevertheless sometimes has to be done.

Udayan Care maintains a register in which teachers and "mentor mothers" are supposed to make entries every time they physically manhandle a child. They are also supposed to record all details of such acts, including their reasoning for the use of force. When asked if maintaining such a register might actually provide implied license for teachers to physically abuse children, Dutt was unable to give a clear reply.

Just north of New Delhi in Rishikesh at Parmarth Niketan, where guidelines for teaching at the gurukulam (school) there clearly state that beating children is a crime, students were nonetheless being abused. This was occurring even though Swami Chidanand Saraswati, the gurukulam's presiding dean,

affectionately known as Muniji, strongly admonished corporal punishment when he talked with me.

Rishikumars, as students at Parmarth Niketan are called, told me that they were often beaten. While this was denied by two of the ashram's women managers, Muniji himself said that he was not shocked. Apparently, even though firm rules about the benevolent handling of children had been formally set in place, there were at least some teachers who just would not or could not follow those rules for one reason or another. Although Muniji promised to conduct further investigations into the matter himself, the very fact that he was just hearing about this abuse for the first time from me, indicates another dimension of the problem: a lack of communication. The law, the spirit of the law or the inspiration to follow the law was somehow not filtering throughout the entire system in the same way (See interviews below).

After extensive questioning, some women teachers at Parmarth Niketan admitted that although they did not administer corporal

punishment to school children, they did at home to their own children. This, they said, was their right, since their children belonged to them. "They are my children," one teacher defended. "And anyway, how can I correct them without beating them?"

Just up the road at Omkarananda Ashrams, the principal of Omkarananda Nilayam, one of two schools in Rishikesh run by the ashram, Col. (rtd.) D. L. Sachdeva, stated that only after he had joined the school some three months back were steps taken to check the practice of corporal punishment. What happened before his arrival, he said, was anyone's guess. Sachdeva admitted that once he was told that someone from Hinduism Today would be coming to interview them concerning corporal punishment, he immediately opened the issue for debate among the officials of the school.

According to him, the response was overwhelmingly in favor of formally stopping the abuse altogether, even though,

apparently, a concern that this should be done had already been widely expressed among teachers.

The Vice-President of Omkarananda Ashrams, Swami Vishveswarananda, said that although he and the founder of their institution, the late Swami Omkarananda, were against corporal punishment and that most of his teachers would concur with such a sentiment, he could not assure that the abuse of children was not currently being practiced in the chain of schools run by his ashrams. There are hundreds of teachers and thousands of students, he lamented, and it would be impossible to guarantee that every teacher was behaving properly.

As I reflected on my interviews at these three honored Hindu institutions where big people hitting little people was occurring even under the guidance of spiritual leaders, I could not

help but wonder what it was like in the public schools of India. In India's Central Schools, as they are called, there is no desire or plan to curb corporal punishment nor even the slightest knowledge of its far-reaching ill effects. I was now coming to fully cognize the seriousness of India's child abuse. It was far worse than I thought.

I already knew that, today, child beating in India is so commonplace that it has dissolved into the background of "the way things are." Adult men and women who grew up in this society, where corporal punishment was commonplace, find it difficult now to consider that perhaps there is another way that children might be raised. These people live with a deeply ingrained assumption that, in the control of children, there is just no alternative to child beating.

Every month in New Delhi alone there is

some grim ordeal being showcased by the media, detailing cruel treatment of a child student by a teacher. In February, 2002, an 11-year-old student was hospitalized for five days after her teacher beat her with a stick for not bringing her notebook to class. In January of the same year, a teacher pulled eight-year-old Rachna's hair out by the roots when she was unable to properly recite her Hindi lesson. A few months before that, a 13-year-old student was stripped naked and paraded down the halls of her school. One 17-year-old student was actually hospitalized with a cerebral concussion after being brutally beaten by his physics teacher for full five minutes. The list goes on.

Many Indian teachers and parents who beat their kids contend they are simply following an ancient tradition that is not only acceptable but honorable. Certainly, it is true that violence in teaching is a part of Indian history and folklore. But this does not make it

right. Stories glorifying a teacher's brutality as a "blessing" are not even logical. The youth of today are too bright and intelligent for this. At the very least, they expect reason. They hear or read these stories and perceive in them easy excuses for people bigger and older than they are to rule them by fear.

Times are changing and so must the discipline of children. The very idea of corporal punishment is completely out of sync with the concept of ahimsa. It always was. Hence, there have always been at least a few good Hindus who lived, taught and learned in peace and harmony. The difference now is that more people are willing and wanting to practice nonviolence with full understanding of all of its implications. This was exemplified recently when the state government of Andhra Pradesh issued an order banning corporal punishment in schools. Under this new law, offenders are liable for prosecution under the Indian Penal

Code. Such notable deeds bode well for the future.

Yet still, old habits die hard. Determined and persistent effort must be made gradually over a long period of time. Looking at the problem of abuse squarely and bringing it out into the open is a beginning step.

All these punishments do have an impact. We do not repeat the mistakes. I would like to be treated with love. With love, even God can be attained. So, with love we can win over any human being.

Admissions

Both Parmarth Niketan and Omkarananda Ashrams opened their doors wide in welcome when Hinduism Today came to call for these interviews. They were proud to present themselves as high-profile examples of institutions featuring a new wave of nonviolent educational programs slowly infiltrating schools and homes around the world. Risking criticism, as all trendsetters do, they bravely faced microphone and camera and clarified in the process that the challenges of setting new

precedent are not always obvious or simple and that successful communication is a rare thing. Hence, the following collection of surprisingly diverse perspectives, which represent the thoughts of thousands presumably dedicated to a common ideal, reveal in the final analysis that, while they officially support not physically punishing kids, it is an ideal they have not yet fully realized.

Parmarth Niketan:

Swami Chidanand Saraswati
(Muniji):

Beating a rishikumar
(student) is a crime and
should not be done. But still
sometimes my acharyas
(teachers) come and tell me
that they should be allowed
to give more severe
punishment. But I put my

foot down. If the children are handled with violence, they will learn violence. If they are handled with care and love, they will learn care and love.

TEACHERS

Pratibha Joshi: A big wall comes between the child you beat and yourself. That child will not improve. Many of the children that come here have been beaten at home and at school. Even their parents come here and tell us to beat them. It is very difficult to teach them that there is another way. But we are having marvelous results.

Rekha Rao: I finished my teacher's training 30 years ago in New Delhi. I have taught in many schools. Children are very sensitive. They sense you even when you do not open yourself up to them. Your body language conveys a lot. They will either feel comfortable or uncomfortable around you. I do not believe in beating children. If you

restrain children by unfair means, you will ruin their personalities and break their self-esteem. We do not have to do much. We do not have to resort to anything. Over time they will take us as their gurus if we handle ourselves properly. The parents trust us with these children, their most valuable possessions. We must not do injustice to

that trust.

Amit Upadhyaya: Let me tell you that I have come out of a gurukula. I was beaten a lot. I know what it is like. The best way to teach is to live right with the children like friends. If their parents instruct them, they may not obey. But if a friend tells them

something, they will understand more readily.

Joshi Naresh: Like Amit, I was raised in a gurukulam where I was beaten. Now I am a teacher, and I have come to the conclusion that child-beating is just not the correct way to handle children.

Shashi Gaur: The children here are now treated with great love. They will obey what you say. I have never seen anything like this.

STUDENTS

Navin Kumar: I do wrong acts and guruji (teacher) slaps me. It was day before yesterday only that I got a slap. I got it because I was doing masti (fun).

Kamlesh Sharma:

Although we try to avoid doing anything wrong, mistakes sometimes happen. Then our teachers punish us. I have not yet been slapped. The punishments given to me include cleaning the gurukulam and standing in the sun. Sometimes I am sent

to recite mantrams on
the bank of the
Ganges.

Harish Vyas: I am a
good boy, but I do
some naughty things
when all of the others
are having fun. My
teachers do not get

angry with me, and I have not yet been beaten, because I do not make big mistakes. I am scolded sometimes and asked to write down some words many times as punishment. But this improves my handwriting and helps

me memorize the lessons. Sometimes they ask me to bow down and touch my foot thumb as a punishment.

Seeta Yadav: I am the house captain of the school. I love all of the

teachers, and all my teachers love me. I love my school. I also inspire the children to do good in life. I tell them to respect their elders. If a child does something wrong, then we punish the child. The child may be asked to stand in one place for a long

time.

Omkaranda
Ashram:

Swami
Visheswarananda:

Beating children is an act of emotion. An emotional act is never a controlled act. Thus, violent child abuse is a very dangerous thing and should not occur. I do agree that some sort of punishment must be there. But common sense must be used.

There are other methods which will work. Although possibilities for alternative methods are endless, they must be formulated very carefully. The child's dignity should never be hurt. Now, this is not so easy. We are now running 74

educational institutions. To control so many schools is a very difficult task. Anything can happen and not everyone is honest and moral in following the rules. We give instructions to all of our teachers that abuse should not be used. But what

most often happens is a teacher gets angry, and in that state of anger he acts. I call this street fighting. Swami Omkarananda would never have supported any type of child beating. It may have happened during earlier times, but we have now entered a

new age.

TEACHERS

Meenakshi Gupta: I am principal of Omkarananda Preparatory School in Rishikesh. When we ourselves live in a disciplined way, only then can we expect discipline from the children. We have to set an

example for them in all of our activities and through our daily routine.

Sometimes slapping occurs. The children love me, but the most important thing is that they are also afraid of me. Only in this way

can discipline be enforced. One kind of punishment we give is to make naughty children feel inferior. We send them to the playgroup, which is the lower class. We demoralize them in this way and make

them feel ashamed.
Then they improve.

Col. (Rtd.) D. L.
Sachdeva: I am
principal of
Omkaranda
Saraswati Nilayam
in Rishikesh. I

cannot say anything about what happened before my arrival. I joined this school just three months back. Now I am a strict follower of this rule about no corporal punishment whatsoever. When I

first arrived, some punishments were being given. It was expected. Even the parents themselves would come and ask why we were not beating their children? My method is: a child misbehaves once,

then a second time.
The third time a
note is sent to his
parents. When this is
about to happen
some children cry.
Even some girls
request us not to
send the note to the
parents because
they know they will

be beaten at home. Imagine. Then I tell the student, "Ok, don't worry." On some other pretext, I call the parents in and tell them what they are doing at home is not good. You know, the major thing happening is

that in many of these schools there is not proper coordination among these three groups: the teachers, the parents and the students.

Mahavir Singh Negi:
Sometimes it is very much needed for children to be hit. We can also give them punishment, like making them stand on a chair, or getting into the cock posture (standing on one leg). There

are children who can be made to understand things without this kind of punishment, but others are just very naughty and need to be tackled differently. Our forefathers and fathers used to say

how they were disciplined by beating. They were even beaten to the extent that their teachers would actually haunt them in their dreams.

Today, mostly what you find is that the children who are

given beatings
belong to the low
performance group.

STUDENTS

Dimple Singh:In this school, teachers write remarks in their diaries. There are children who will not feel like coming to the school after they have been beaten.

But by the
remarks given in
the diaries of the
teachers, the
parents of the
children can get to
know about the
child's problems
and the child
himself becomes

careful about his behavior. So the remarks given in the diaries by the teachers are effective. I am naughty sometimes at home but not in school. At home

sometimes I get a
beating.

Kriti Datta: I have
never been beaten
or scolded in
school, but I have
seen other

children being
beaten. Boys and
girls both are
beaten without
any partiality.

Pawan Arora:
Physical

punishment is given to children when they behave beyond a limit. In that case they are sometimes slapped, and that is ok.

Rahul Sharma:

Teachers mostly try to make us understand. If you make a child understand with love, he will learn easily, but if you beat a child, he will be difficult to

control and will
never understand.

"In Memory of
My Son"

Kiran Modi
named Udayan
Care after her
son, Udayan,
who cared,
loved and lived
for children
before his early

death at the
age of 21. From
its inception
this small
orphanage-scho
ol has been a
labor of love.
Hinduism Today

interviewed
Kiran Modi, its
founder, and
Vikram Dutt,
her right-hand
man. Here are
some of their
thoughts.

Kiran Modi:We started Udayan Care in 1994. I am the managing trustee. From the very outset my inspiration

was the
memory of my
son, Udayan,
who died from
an accident at
the age of 21 in
America where
he was going to

school. As we were going through all of the papers that he left behind, we found that he was doing a lot of work for

children. He was sponsoring kids for a program called "Save A Child." And he was doing some other things like

this. We did not even know about these activities. So we thought the best thing that we could do would be to

continue doing
something
similar in his
memory. This is
how Udayan
Care came to
be. Udayan
means

"sunrise."

One by one, I
found more
women like me
to help all
mothers. We

set up different
homes and
started caring
for the children.
Many of the
kids that we
care for have
behavioral

problems. They
are straight
from the street
and have been
abused a lot.
We realized
that we were
going to need

some
professional
help. This was
when Vikram
came in. He is a
rehabilitation
expert. He
takes care of

the counseling.
To control any
further abuse,
Vikram devised
a parenting
pledge.
Everyone has
signed it. It

makes it clear
that no one is to
beat anyone.
We also devised
a punishment
register. If a
teacher beats a
child, even

though it is
against the
rules, he or she
is supposed to
record it in this
register.

The children
love it here.
One child,
before she
came to live
here, was made
to steal and beg
and do all kinds

of things. Her
own father
made her do
this. At the age
of seven she
ran away from
home after
being beaten

with a burning
stick. After
living in the
streets for four
years on her
own, she came
to stay with us.
She is now one

of our brightest
children.

Vikram Dutt: In
disciplining our
children at
Udayan Care,

we have
developed
some
alternative
methods. One is
tickling. We
have these
major tickling

sessions. If a
child does
something
wrong, all of the
other children
will catch him
and tickle him.
Violence as a

consequence of wrongdoing is replaced with a fun activity. We also use something called creative art therapy. The

vocabulary
skills of a young
child are
minimal. But he
or she can draw
a picture and
enjoy it, too.
And in their

drawings, they
do not realize it
but their inner
thoughts come
out, and we can
come to
understand
them and work

with them. We
are working
towards an
ideal system.
The most
important thing
is to recognize
where we are

now and build a
bridge toward
where we want
to be. We have
all participated
in the
nonviolence
workshops, but

where are we
today? All of
India is in a
very violent
state. Violence
comes when
you do not think
about your

action. The moment you start thinking about your action, it will be difficult for you to slap. Then, if you do slap, it

will be for good reason. In seven or eight months, I have given three slaps, but each of these was given like a

life-saving
injection.

Fourteen Tips
For Teachers

Experts agree
that the best
way to deal
with
childhood
misbehavior,
both in class

and at home,
is to prevent
it from
occurring in
the first place.
This is not
always

possible, of
course, but
schools and
homes
too with the
best discipline
not only

correct
misconduct
after the fact
but also
actually catch
it before it
happens by

teaching
youth
appropriate
behavioral
and
communication skills early.

Here are
some tips for
teachers for
coping with
kids in class
with
kindness.

* Rehearse
how you will
handle
various
difficult
situations
that might

arise in class.

* Plan youth
activities well
enough that

students just
don't have
time to cause
trouble.

* Try to
teach rather
than punish.

* Find ways

to encourage
and
compliment.

* View

student's
misbehavior
as mistakes
in judgment
rather than
negative
tendencies.

* Eliminate
"reward" and
"punishment."
"

* Make
consequences
relate to
misbehavior.
For example,
if a child
makes a

mess, he or
she should
clean it up.

* Point out

things kids
can do to
help each
other foster a
team spirit.

* Ask
"what," "how"
and "why"
questions
when
challenges
come up so

students
know you are
genuinely
interested in
their opinion.
Ask for their
explanation

before
imposing
your own.

* Promote

self-control
by teaching
calming
techniques
like deep
breathing,
counting to

ten and
taking a walk
to "chill."

* Make

friends with
students. Say
hello and
smile. Always
use a calm
tone of voice.

* Use good
manners
when
addressing
children
about their
behavior. Be

sure to say: "I
am sorry,"
"May I?" and
"Excuse me"
when
appropriate.
Teach by

example.

* If a child
exhibits many
behaviors

which
concern you,
don't try to
change all of
them at once.
Take one at a
time.

* Set
behavioral
rules but
make sure
they are few
in number,
reasonable

and
appropriate
to the child's
age and
development.

RESOURCES

Books:
Positive
Discipline in

the
Classroom by
Dr. Jane
Nelsen,
Raising
Self-Reliant
Children in a

Self-Indulgent World by H. Stephen Glenn and Jane Nelsen, Teachers Who Make a

Difference Video by H. Stephen Glenn, Winning Over Your Difficult Students, by

Yvette Zgonc.

Web:

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www.stopphitti

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