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PARENTING

Growing up Hindu

Pediatrician's no-nonsense guide a boon to bewildered parents

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Hillary Clinton got it right when she wrote, "It takes a village to raise a child." But, what do you do when your Hindu village is 5 1/2 time zones and two oceans away? Dr. Krishna D. Bhat, pediatrician and father of three children born and reared in America, faced the problem head on. "When my eldest son, Anand, was three years old, I enrolled him in a Christian day-care center as a 'mother's day out' for my wife. All was well until little Anand came home reciting Christian prayers. I was shocked," Bhat told Hinduism Today. "I had to admit that I wasn't teaching him anything." In developing a strategy to raise his children correctly, Bhat had the unique opportunity to learn not only from his own mistakes but by observing the mistakes in the hundreds of families under his care.

Encouraged by friends to pass on his experiences, he wrote Guide to Indo-American Parenting (360 pages, Uma Publishing, US\$26.95), a practical, down-to-earth handbook on raising Hindu children in America. "If you grow up in India, you are Indian inside and outside the home because you are

surrounded by the Indian environment, culture, religious and other social structures. However, raising children in America is a different matter," says Bhat. "At home we want our children to be Indian, but outside of the home, our children need to function as Americans. This dichotomy causes conflicts in the day-to-day life of parents who want to keep their Indian values and live in the Western world at the same time."

Bhat himself grew up in the small farming community of Ooratot, northern Karnataka, India. After graduating from Karnataka Medical College and practicing for a time in his village, he arrived in the United States in 1976, finally settling in Beaumont, Texas, in 1982 with his wife, Vasudha. He was anxious from the beginning that his children learn and preserve their ancestral heritage. As part of his strategy, he and local Hindu families founded the India Cultural Center in Beaumont, Texas, as a place to educate the youth. While the Cultural Center was successful in teaching Hindu kids, there were still "children in Beaumont who had become totally Americanized," according to Bhat, "They believed Indian was inferior. Their parents themselves were criticizing India, so the kids didn't want to be Indian." His Guide to Indo-American Parenting addresses the full range of child-rearing situations he's

encountered.

Bhat's book stresses family interaction first and foremost. Only through daily quality time together can a Hindu family maintain its cultural and religious integrity, he believes, while living in a predominately non-Hindu culture. To accomplish this, he recommends "family meetings, praying together and other religious activities. As it is often difficult to have an official family meeting, you can pray together every day on a regular basis. The prayer service becomes a family meeting. After your prayers, you can discuss daily events and eat a meal." Bhat insists fathers come home nightly and dine with the family. "At the dinner table you will learn a lot of things about your children: what they like or dislike, their homework and their sports interest. Discuss what they did in school that day. The daily family dinner helps create a very close-knit family."

America's fast food culture is an obstacle both to the family meals together and to preserving a vegetarian diet. A lifelong vegetarian himself, Bhat advises teaching your child to follow the

vegetarian diet for health benefits rather than religion. "If you explain why eating meat is not healthy, believe me they will be far likelier to listen to you than if you just demand they not eat meat."

What about at school? Some children are embarrassed to say they are vegetarian, especially if none of their classmates are. Parents can help, Bhat says, "by letting the teacher know about this in the beginning of the school year. In America people are very open. They understand and respect your beliefs. In fact, they are more caring to your children if told in advance about your concerns. They will try to have vegetarian foods for you. People no longer make fun of vegetarians. Rather, they respect their choice."

Even food prepared at home offers no exemption from debate. "During my observations of...Indian families, some parents would say, 'My children don't eat Indian food. They like American food.' Children adapt to the practice of eating Indian food at home very well. You should not give them too many choices....It becomes a big hassle when

you have to cook two different types of food for three meals per day. We should not let ourselves get bogged down by all the demands our children make because they are experiencing peer pressure. It is your job as a parent to guide your child in the way you want him to grow up. If you don't, he will shift gears exactly as his peers shift theirs...peer pressure can only affect children who are followers. Children who are leaders have higher self-esteem."

We asked Dr. Bhat if he believes children should be disciplined with corporal punishment--spanking, slapping or pinching? "Absolutely not," he states emphatically. "I have been totally against it all my life." Pinching the ears, rapping knuckles with rulers and being hit by teachers when a wrong answer was recited was standard fare in India, he shared. Even home life had its share of corporal punishments. Admitting once striking his eldest, Bhat confides he was wrong then. "I do not recommend spanking, beating or threatening the child for any reason. The best approach is 'time out'." Bhat continued, "Conversation helps you get to know your child better. He will become friends with you rather

than being scared of you as a distant father whom he doesn't know. According to my principle, when a child wears the same shoe size as the adult wears, this is the time your child becomes your friend."

Bhat has a marvelous section on arranged marriage, written as advice to the child, not the parent. He advises the boy to ask the girl if she likes, say, Chinese food, then take her out to an Italian restaurant. If the evening is full of complaints on the switch, he points out, complaints are likely to be the case the rest of your married life. He covers the "love marriage" possibility, too, observing that if your potential spouse comes from a culture that considers divorce a convenient option, the marriage is not likely to last.

At the heart of Bhat's message is this: "The majority of Indo-Americans have come to this country to achieve 'the Great American Dream'--money, education, high standard of living, etc. But such achievement is only 50% of achievement in life. The other 50% comes from

building a strong family. Without that, no matter how much a child learns or how much he earns, life will have no meaning. Happiness comes not from money, but is within you. If you have a happy family, you will be happy."

The ever-pragmatic Bhat includes in his book instructions on Hindu philosophy, meditation, hatha yoga asanas, puja worship and samskaras. In addition a supplementary teaching cassette for the puja is available for ^{us}\$6. This is a must-read book for Hindu parents outside India, and contains a wealth of advice for anyone of any faith wishing to create a stable and religious home life.

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