

## Reflection of the Focal Lead in India



In 2019, I co-facilitated a preparatory session with children where we spoke about the three major religions in India – Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. We discussed what these religions used during their prayers, and the children noticed that all of them used bells, lamps, candles, and flowers. I explained that all religions talk about love, peace, respect, charity, and care for all; we just give them different names. They all understood it well. I left with a thought - if I can discuss this with young children, why can't I try these ideas with adults too?

When I became the focal point for implementing the Toolkit on Nurturing the Spiritual Development of Children in the Early Years at Shanti Ashram, I gained deep knowledge about spirituality. I grew professionally as a trainer and, with the MEL team, acquired technical knowledge in monitoring and evaluation. My ideas about spirituality align with the toolkit's framework. This experience enriched my core values and provided me with a broader and more detailed way to communicate these ideas to adults. It made me realize my responsibility in society.

**We have been planning positive parenting workshops for our Bala Shanti children's parents.** From the baseline survey results, we identified the literacy rates of the young mothers, their potential, and the need for parenting sessions to empower them, ultimately benefiting their children. While the mothers agreed that all sessions were important and useful for their children, they struggled to allocate time for themselves due to their other commitments and priorities. This feedback gave me a comprehensive understanding to plan the ideal duration and timing of the course, addressing their challenges effectively.

I recommend that every parent receive take-home handouts that are reader-friendly and carefully designed for those with limited literacy. These handouts will serve as a reminder of the session's objectives. At the end of each session, we can suggest a few activities from the "16 Daily Interactions with Children" that parents can follow at home until their next session. This approach will help maintain momentum and encourage continuous reflection and application of what they learned, ensuring they don't forget the session's content.

**The core team adapted the Toolkit to be implemented into the well-established 30-year-old Bala Shanti Programme.** During the implementation of activities in the classroom, we decided to ensure that our existing curriculum and Montessori ideology were not disrupted. This emphasized the importance of performing day-to-day activities, whether small or significant, to foster self-independence at each child's own pace.

The toolkit provided us with the flexibility to adapt it to our context. Our small classroom setting inspired us to find innovative and creative ways to integrate the toolkit activities. We discovered that the foundation of our curriculum already included activities that nurture spiritual capacities in children. For example, interfaith prayers planted the seeds of religious harmony among the young ones, Shramadan (voluntary labour) fostered care for

the environment, and the practice of children taking activities and putting them back on the shelf nurtured care for others and self-discipline. There are many more examples like these.

At our weekly review meeting, the educators' diary prompted us to rethink the activity materials. We decided to combine materials that can be used for multiple toolkit activities, which helped address the challenge of limited space in small classrooms.

**Many new vocabularies have been added to the Bala Shanti programme's daily work.** Terms like Training of Trainers, Focus Group Discussion, Facilitators/Educators Training, Baseline and Endline Surveys, Facilitator's Diary, and Classroom Observation Rubric have each provided us with numerous learnings and interesting stories during the implementation process. This also helped us scale up our professional growth and recognize our achievements.

Periodic meetings with the global community team implementing the toolkit allowed us to see the bigger picture and realize that others around the world are facing similar issues. Violence against children is prevalent in every nook and corner of the world. These training sessions proved that it takes a village to raise a child and united like-minded individuals who agree on the importance of the toolkit's core context.

When we looked at the data from the baseline studies, I realized how a well-prepared tool can convey so many findings about the community. We also recognized the need for effective local language communication so that the tool's core expectations can be clearly passed on to a community with limited literacy. Finding the equivalent and appropriate words in Tamil was a significant challenge. The MEL process gave us the freedom and flexibility to localize the technical tools by involving us in the tool design thinking sessions.

**By sharing our early findings both in India and abroad, we have initiated a broader conversation on the importance and impact of nurturing spirituality in early childhood.** These efforts are paving the way for further learning, reflection, and potential scaling up of our innovative approach

As Gandhi Ji said, "If we are to bring real peace to the world, we shall have to begin with the children." This toolkit taught me how to do that. Now, I am ready to shake the world in a small and gentle way.

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