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Parenting for the 21st Century
A Values-Based Approach
Living Values: An Educational Initiative

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I think we all share the belief that Education for the 21st Century must include parents. We know that parents are children's first and most important teachers – and yet they seldom receive the training and support that allow them to be aware of the importance of their parenting actions, stay aware of children's needs, cope with the challenges of child-rearing, and become aware of the beauty of their own inner resources.

I believe in the power of the human mind and spirit. A project I was involved with in 1988, Global Cooperation for a Better World, reinforced a latent perception that each human being shares a vision of a better world, a vision of all we can be, all that we want to be. I'd like you to experiment for a moment – in your mind's eye imagine the world, as you would like it to be. Step into the 21st Century that you would like to create -- visualize the quality of the air, the environment, how you would feel. A family walks by, how do they look, what are their interactions like? As another family approaches, how do they interact? Think of yourself as a child, imagine a scene with your parents, and perhaps a brother or sister. Imagine yourself as a parent. Picture interacting with a child. What values do they have? What values you do have?

I think all parents have a dream of what they would like to be with their children -- as well as what they would like their children to be like! I am sure we could all cite many factors that lead to less than optimal parenting; the largest percentage of less than optimal parenting is simply a lack of awareness of the needs of children and ignorance of good parenting practices. Many parents have difficulty coping with the stresses of this world. Some inflict harm because of their own emotional functioning – often a reflection of their own history of abuse.

Traditionally, parent education has helped people be better parents and caregivers. In the parent groups I have led, caregivers report enjoying parenting more as they learn effective parenting skills and spend time playing with their children. They grow in confidence as parents. Many parents transfer learned skills to other relationships and evidence increased self-esteem as they are encouraged by their own ability to affect their life. For example, as they learn to active listen to a child or affirm a child's qualities, they discover the same skills improve adult relationships.

In recent years, I think two trends have especially increased the challenges of parenting: growing materialism and violence in films. Both have diverted time and focus away from traditional pastimes and the transmission of culture and spiritual values. I do not think we have yet recognized the profound influence of violence in films on youth. It sanctions inhumanity. It is time to look at what we are creating. Far too many people are distant from their emotional potential, and lack the social and emotional skills for peace and equality. To let the situation continue as is it, is to continue what we have now -- a world of injustice, inequity, and violence.

As we approach the 21st Century, we must tap into the creative energy and universal values that each human being holds within. Not only must we renew efforts to educate parents, but utilize their dreams for their children to facilitate the development of universal values - - providing an opportunity to look anew at what is important in their life, to reconnect with the values of their culture, explore attitudes to actualize those values, and skills to incorporate them in their child rearing practices.

The *Parenting/Caregivers Module* for **Living Values: An Educational Initiative** encourages parents and caregivers to look at how they provide their children with a philosophy of living, thereby facilitating their overall growth, development, and choices so they may integrate themselves into the community with respect, confidence, and purpose.

The *Parenting/Caregivers Module* includes learning effective parenting skills within a supportive group process, plus it adds an often-missing component: the exploration of values. Engendering effective parenting and increased well being is important, but if we are to attempt to go beyond intolerance and inequity in this world, more is required. In this program, parents are encouraged to explore their core values. As people explore values they glimpse the higher self within. As they discuss bringing those values into practice, they encounter their own wisdom. As parents recognize the importance of their own values, and understand that their behavior conveys more than words to their children, an opportunity to change opens. Another dimension comes into being as caregivers learn about and play the Values Activities for Children, and contribute their favorite childhood games and songs.

The *Parents/Caregivers Module* is part of the *Educators' Kit* of **Living Values: An Educational Initiative**. This Educational Initiative is a result of a cooperative partnership among global educators in consultation with the National Commission of UNICEF (Spain), representatives from the Education Cluster of UNICEF (New York), and the Brahma Kumaris. This experiential values education program has *Values Activities*

for Children, Ages 2-7, Ages 8-14, and Young Adults. There is a special section for Parents/Caregivers and a *Children-At-Risk/Refugees Module*. It is currently being piloted in 57 countries at 220 sites. It focuses on twelve universal values: cooperation, freedom, peace, respect, happiness, honesty, humility, love, responsibility, simplicity, tolerance and unity.

In the **LVEI** Parenting classes, parents explore their dreams for their children, discuss what a chosen value means to them, build awareness about how children learn values, discuss their culture's methods, play values activities, and develop understanding and skills to use in imparting values to their children. In this paradigm, facilitators serve as models of acceptance and support in a small group setting and as sources of practical parental guidance as needed.

The Parenting/Caregivers Module is organized in three sections.

Section 1 -- The Group Process. The group process sets the tone and flow of values-based workshops. After the orientation session there is a **Six-Step Framework** for teaching values for ongoing sessions.

Section 2 -- Parent Values Activities. This section provides values-based content to be used during the group process. The Parent Values Activities complement and build upon the structured Values Activities for Children, which are designed for ages 2 through young adult.

Section 3 -- Parenting Skills. This section addresses common parental concerns and offers specific skills to deal with those concerns. Facilitators may choose to include this parenting skill building information as necessary, or include it in related values sections. For example, positively building behaviors through praise can be added to the groups exploring the value of respect.

In the **Orientation Session** in **Section One**, facilitators are encouraged to do introductions, perhaps have an icebreaker, and introduce the Living Values Educational Initiative. Then the facilitator engages the caregivers in a couple of exercises. This one seems effective in having people experience the importance of their own behavior: *“As these meetings will be on values, I want to start by asking you all to think of someone who made a positive impact in your life. Has everyone thought of somebody? Think back in time, and remember the scene and the interaction with that person . . . What value or quality did that person have that made a difference for you? . . . After they share, add, “If everyone in the world had that quality, how would the world be a different place? Why are these values you’ve mentioned so important?”*

Each person within the group has to feel the group is relevant and each parent group has to establish its own identity; have them establish the values they wish to explore. Facilitators have them reflect on the values they mentioned and think about the values most important in their life. This time of building cohesion begins a foundation of mutual parent support as modeled by the facilitator.

The role of facilitator or group leader is key to setting the tone of the workshops. Accepting group members and providing positive affirmations and respect are necessary to make group members feel they are in a safe environment. Giving regard and appreciation for all comments is important not only to create a rich learning environment but also to deepen the parents' acceptance of and value for the self. Especially in an adult learning environment, it is essential to draw upon the experience of the participants and to allow them to assimilate the material through their own learning styles and frames of reference.

The following is a method to have the parents tune into their dreams. “*I want you to picture your children at their current ages. Imagine the values that you would like to see in your children and in your relationship with your children . . . What are your interactions like? . . . How do you feel inside when values-based interactions are taking place? What did you picture?*” After parents/caregivers discuss their experiences and images, the following questions encourage reflection and discussion on the development of values in children:

- ◆ *What types of activities promote those behaviors?*
- ◆ *What types of words and attitudes generate positive responses?*

Choosing the Values

In most groups, facilitators find that several values emerge. The group may wish to decide on which values to focus first. It is of great benefit to have the school and home working on the same values at the same time. If, however, parents decide they want to start with a value that has not been chosen, listen, list their reasons, and let them come to a consensus. They will be more motivated to be involved when they are part of the decision.

Six-Step Framework for Session 2 and Ongoing Sessions

• Step One: Discuss the Value

It is ideal to take at least a couple of sessions for each value. Begin the time on each values with a poem or a short story on the particular value, or you may wish to read a short, pertinent selection from *Living Values: A Guidebook*. When the group begins the second value in later session, ask the group if one of them would like to open with one of their favorite stories, poems or songs. Open discussion with, “*What does that value mean to you?*”

• Step Two: Discuss How We Communicate That Value

This series of questions is to elicit the wealth of knowing and wisdom that parents/caregivers have within: “*How do we communicate this value? How do we teach it to our children? How do we increase the experience of _____ in the home? In our relationship with our children? In our interactions with our children? In the home environment? In the self?*” The parents usually conclude that children learn from the behaviors of parents.

- **Step Three: Play With The Value**

- **What Other Values Activities Can We Do At Home?**

After the caregivers have discussed the value of focus, facilitators can refer to Section 2 of the *Parents/Caregivers Module* which provides suggestions for parent activities, most of which are from the *Value Activities for Children* sections. Section 2 is organized by values, and has suggestions for each value. Parents are encouraged to play with the exercises used at the age level of their children. During this section, parents are asked to share their favorite childhood songs, stories and games – the intent is to bring the values of that culture more frequently into the home. Hopefully, the group will spend at least half its time playing and experimenting with the values, and rediscover the importance and beauty of play.

In Section 2, there are separate sections for each of the twelve values for the parents to do:

- **At Group Meetings** -- Activities are designed for the formal group process, with simulation and discussion a critical part of the learning. These activities invite parents to model the values as their children are or will be doing.
- **At Home** -- Activities or suggestions are offered for parents and caregivers in the home setting. A limited list, it is intended to stimulate the caregivers' creativity, and the sharing of their ideas.

At Group Meetings, parents view a variety of activities that provide children with the experience of a value at different levels. The *Values Activities for Children* have Reflection Points at each age level. For example, children ages 2-7 are told:

- Respect is feeling good about myself.
- Respect is knowing I am unique and valuable.
- Respect is knowing I am lovable and capable.
- Respect is liking who I am
- Respect is listening to others.
- Respect is knowing others are valuable, too.
- Respect is treating others nicely.

Reflection Points on Tolerance for students aged 8-14 discuss one of the following points each day, sometimes following up with essays or illustrations:

- Peace is the goal, tolerance is the method.
- Tolerance is being open and receptive to the beauty of differences.
- Tolerance is mutual respect through mutual understanding.
- The seeds of intolerance are fear and ignorance.
- The seed of tolerance, love, is watered by compassion and care.

The value reflection points are based on the understanding that every human being has innate worth and inalienable dignity. It is wonderful to watch children talk about these, and then have them start putting them into practice with some of the activities. The reflection points can provide a new perspective for parents as well.

The visualizations within the *Values Activities for Children* encourage children to access their own creativity and inner gifts. One of the At Home suggestions for parents is to consider including a short visualization or a prayer in their nighttime ritual with their children.

There are communication exercises to teach peaceful social skills. Parents become familiar with what the children will be learning. For example, in section on peace, 4 year olds will learn, "Arms are for hugging, not for shoving" while older children learn conflict resolution strategies. Artistic activities, songs and dance have students express themselves while experiencing the value of focus. They draw murals of a better world, create peace slogans and posters, and sculpt freedom. Children identify their own qualities and the qualities of others in the unit on respect. Little kids make crowns, with their qualities as the jewels, and then dance. Older students do a five-day experiment while doing their usual school activities in the unit on respect – exploring how subtle respect and disrespect is given and how it feels. In the discussion time that follows students the effects of different attitudes and behaviors. Game-like activities are thought provoking and fun; cooperative games have them tie ankles together and eat without bending their elbows, skits during the value of honesty have students look at the human consequences of cheating others. Skits and imaginative thinking tasks stimulate awareness of personal and social responsibility, and for teenagers, issues of social justice. The development of self-esteem and tolerance continue throughout the exercises. Parents are encouraged to add their own culture's stories, songs and games, and those of cultures around them.

- **Step Four: Discuss How Each Parent Can Implement At Home Present Parenting Skills As Appropriate**

Opening the discussion to the feelings, thoughts, and obstacles to implementing the value in the home setting is essential. Many parents have not had parenting classes, and some have had negative or abusive role models. Hence, this is a perfect time to listen carefully, open up the discussion to suggestions from other caregivers, and teach appropriate Parenting Skills for the situation. A facilitator who has taught parenting classes will be well prepared for these discussions, as often parents are receptive to input and in need of practical strategies to reduce conflict and stress.

To aid facilitators with less extensive parent-group experience, Section 3 contains Parenting Skills in response to common parental concerns as well as information addressing those concerns. Suggestions are given for different age groups, from 0 through 18 year olds.

The second session is a perfect time to present the information in **The Importance of Play, Parenting Skill**. It was written in response to the common parental concern: "I don't have enough time." Play is beneficial for children; having this kind of interaction with their parents usually makes the relationship closer, and increases the child's self-esteem. Some parents do not play with children, and a few have not had the opportunity to play as adults.

An excerpt:

For Parents of 5- to 9-Year-Olds

Yes, it's hard to find time in this busy world for play and values activities. But, ask yourself:

- Why did I have children in the first place?
- Why do I love them?
- What do I wish I had done more of over the past few years?

Finding some time every day to play with your children is so important. That precious time is when relationships are enjoyed and the feelings of love grow. The children who get "Us Time" get that full attention and close eye contact which tell them they are valued and valuable.

Ask yourself:

- What do I enjoy doing myself that I can do with my child?
- What would be fun for both myself and the child?

There's an interesting saying: "Cooperation follows love." By playing every day with your children so they can count on getting your full, undivided attention for even 15 minutes a day, minor negativities will simply disappear. Play games you enjoyed at that age or would have liked to have played. Play pretend games, play outside, play with balls and dolls, play with the simple enjoyment of enjoying your children. Introduce them to the common games of your culture – perhaps cards and board games, soccer or circle dances. Don't get competitive yourself, but model graceful winning and losing. (Winning a game with a child about one-third of the time is fine.) Teach them things; have them experience themselves to be successful. Take them places that are free. Go on a walk, to a park, to a lake or the ocean.

Us Time can also be a time of just listening with your full attention. Use daily routine time to interact with your children. For instance, converse in the bus or car or as you walk to the store.

Other Parenting Skills:

Time To Be and **'Time Out' To Think and Communicate** are suggested in the value of Peace.

Positively Building Behaviors Through Praise and **Active Listening** are suggested in the value of Respect.

The Balance of Discipline and Love and **Establishing a Ritual** are suggested in the value of Love.

Positively Building Behaviors Through Praise is suggested in the value of Responsibility.

Think Before Saying No is suggested in the value of Honesty.

Staying Stable and Loving is suggested in the value of Responsibility.

Another excerpt:

The Balance of Discipline and Love was in response to the parental statement: "All they want to do is watch TV."

Almost all parents recognize the importance of a healthy diet. They want their children to have nourishing meals and develop good eating habits. They carefully choose the food the family eats. Food for the mind is important as well. The diet of what children watch on television affects their minds and attitudes. Research has shown that more than four hours of television per day is actually harmful to children. They do not develop as well physically or in expressive language, creativity, or social skills. Television can be addictive; it can be a "mind robber." One can sit in front of TV and simply have the mind filled. Emotions we choose to ignore can be dismissed, and we do not have to interact with others or use our mind to find something to do. Many children, consequently, have limited time for the essential tasks of childhood which are critical for physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and social growth. It is important for children to play and exercise, to create and invent, to relate and express.

In the same way that some sweets are okay in a diet, a bit of television is okay, depending on the content. Violence teaches violence. Part of becoming a parent with the balance of discipline and love is learning that it is appropriate to have sensible rules and to tell the children what is right and wrong. Talking about right and wrong actions is most often accepted when the parent is able to share that information calmly and with love. It is amazing how children accept sensible rules. They may fuss for a few days, but you will see positive changes. It is wise to monitor the television and videos to which children are exposed, just as it is wise to monitor the environments in which they are placed. Give small doses of the best of television. There are a few beautiful programs that are inspiring, funny, creative, and humanizing. There are informational ones that are interesting and educational.

Allow your children the opportunities to build forts, climb trees, play sports, dance, do puzzles, and read. Read with your children story books and wonderful tales before bedtime. Talk with them and enjoy your children. This does require more time on the part of the parent, but because of your encouragement and extra effort, your children will learn to entertain themselves, be more creative and positive, and play more successfully with others.

Of course, the facilitator needs to be sensitive to the needs of the group and should feel free to present Parenting Skills as the need arises. The facilitator also needs to be sensitive to cultural issues and should offer only those Parenting Skills which are appropriate and pertinent to the group, tailoring examples as necessary.

- **Step Five: Adjourn With Homework**

Sessions are ended with caregivers each selecting their own homework – perhaps playing with the children, increasing praise, or being more peaceful themselves.

- **Step Six: Next Session**

What Worked?

At the following session, participants are asked to share their experiences/successes at home. “*What worked and what did not? What changes did they notice?*” Facilitators should listen, enjoy the stories, acknowledge, and congratulate them on their efforts. Take time, be light when they feel they have not been successful, help them figure out why something may not be working. This is an important time to build confidence and enthusiasm for their new parenting practices.

When the caregivers are ready to take up the next value, start with Step One again.

Creating a better world for all -- where each child and adult can play, be well feed, educated, and nurtured in a safe, free environment -- is one of the most demanding tasks in the world. In working for that together we will be successful. Congratulations and good luck to each one of you.

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