

How Children Imbibe Social and Behavioural Practices

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I started conducting children's workshops in 1980. The first independent workshop I conducted was where I lived – a semi-urban slum of Mangalore, Attavar. It was a summer camp for children in fine arts and theatre with creativity as the main theme. This workshop taught me many things and I started conducting a series of children's workshops in my village. These continue today and are conducted by the children who we trained and my daughters.

Besides the focus on the themes, in these workshops, we have consciously emphasised certain social and behavioural practices which the children gradually internalise and begin to practise. Over time, these have become a part of the culture of these workshops, which the children have adopted in their everyday practices.

Ownership and participation

In these workshops, the one thing we have practised from the beginning is to share and discuss the details of our plan with the children. After we share our plan, we ask them for their opinion. Initially, children are hesitant to speak. Children speak only if they feel that their words will be taken seriously. Also, adults are scared of asking for children's opinions because sometimes they do not know what to do with those. For example, there have been occasions when we have discussed the workshop plan with the children, and they have suggested we change the order of the activities. Now, as organisers, we would have planned things in a certain way, so when a child suggests a change, the immediate response is to say no; to dismiss it. What adults can do in such situations is to ask children the reasons behind their suggestions. Sometimes, children can come up with brilliant ideas. Adults should be flexible and have the maturity to change plans. We also noticed that when we agreed to incorporate their ideas, the children immediately developed an ownership of the workshop; they began to feel that it was their workshop. Then, conducting the workshop also becomes easy because the children participate wholeheartedly.

In these past years, we have sat with the children, morning and evening, and have held discussions with them. Now, discussion has become a natural part of these workshops. Children are convinced that we will listen to them, and act upon their suggestions. Everybody knows that there will be discussions and that they must participate. This has become a part of the culture of our workshops.

Discipline

Discipline is another difficult aspect that we have worked on with children. This too has to be done continuously and consistently. So right at the beginning of a workshop, we sit together and set certain norms of behaviour that all of us agree to follow. We have a rule that there will be an open discussion but after we agree on the norms of behaviour, all of us have to follow those. Also, if a change is required, it will be done only after another discussion involving everyone. No one person has the right to change any decision taken by the group; it can be changed only by the group. We started with very simple and doable things, like keeping footwear in a straight line outside the room. Today, this has become a habit of all our children. Even if somebody leaves their footwear somewhere else, one or the other child will pick it up and place it in the designated place.

Cleaning our space was another aspect that we decided should be done in rotation by everyone. The workshop space is cleaned before and after every workshop. The thinking that 'we must leave a place better than how we found it' is deeply ingrained. Both girls and boys share this work of cleaning the place equally. Facilitators also clean and do not just oversee the cleaning. This has helped in motivating all the children to do this work.

Conserving resources

Not wasting and using resources judiciously is also a conscious decision and we keep reminding children of this while distributing resources, such as paints, craft paper, scissors, etc., which come at a cost. When children throw away materials,

we draw their attention to it and collect these with them to use again later. In this way, we show them how we must value resources and use them with care. Some articles are common and are used collectively in groups, like scissors. We show them how to keep them safely in one place after use so that they are available for others to use when needed. We reiterate that resources belong to all of us collectively and we should take only as much as we need. As facilitators, we too are careful and use resources with sensitivity and care. Children learn a lot from the way they see us using materials.

Fearlessness and fraternity

Building an atmosphere of fearlessness is a difficult task because by the time children are 6-7 years old, they have already been instructed with: *don't do that, don't do this, don't touch that, don't touch this, don't say that, don't say this*. This makes them quiet and has a very damaging effect on them – they become scared of making mistakes. The fear of making mistakes and the fear of failure are two of the greatest enemies of creativity. Children stop exploring, experimenting, and doing new things. In our setup, we build an atmosphere where children are not scolded, let alone punished. We do not raise our voices and consistently keep repeating to the children that there is no need to raise their voices; that they just need to speak in a tone and at a volume that others can hear them. Children are allowed to express their opinions, ideas and thoughts without restraint. It took us about 5 to 6 years to create this environment but now we can see children being open and saying what they want to say without any fear.

Fighting among themselves is natural in children. While boys have physical fights, girls tend to form

cliques. Both these behaviours are detrimental to their growth. We wanted to create a loving and caring atmosphere but could not fathom where to start. Then, one of our facilitators came up with a wonderful suggestion. She said that fraternity has to start with us so, we consciously made attempts to be good and kind and take care of each other. People do not recognise these behaviours easily. It takes time. We would speak to children about respecting and loving others. It was easier to say but the more important thing was how we as facilitators were treating the children. All of us would treat children with a lot of love and care. I feel children can feel this love and care and it will generate similar feelings in them. Now we do not have to remind them; the love and care are transferred from senior children to juniors naturally. Building a culture is not easy; it requires understanding and convincing. The practices have to be followed consistently until they become habits. Habits slowly form a culture. One thing that we should keep in mind is that no amount of 'telling' has any impact on people. What is said is heard and forgotten, what is practised is learnt and followed. It is also very clear to me that if certain behaviours are 'displayed' only to impress people and do not come naturally as part of our natural conduct, others can see through the charade and reject those.

In all these years, one thing that we have realised is that building a culture is both difficult and easy. It is difficult because it is very complex and requires time and experimentation. It is easy because if we 'live' the culture, we do not need to do anything more; we just need to practise what we want the children to learn, and they will follow us. What they pick and what they ignore is not in your hands. But the possibility of being followed is more.



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