

# What are Children Learning from Us?

There are indeed many things that we consciously teach children, both at home and at school. But are we aware that, even as we navigate our way through the changing urban landscapes of today, there are messages that children unconsciously get from us and our daily behaviour? Might we not be communicating so much else through our passive acceptance of the 'way things are' or by our apparent endorsement of a way of life that is fast becoming the consensual mode of thinking for middle class India? Everyday examples of this are powerful, yet we may hardly realize that our small daily reactions, our little dilemmas and fights, are related to the larger picture of violence that we readily condemn.

It is nine in the morning on a weekday, and you are driving down a busy street in Bangalore. All around you press numerous other vehicles, jostling for space and looking for the merest hint of an advantage. Every passenger is in a tearing hurry to get somewhere—now. You reach a traffic junction and stop at the red signal, watching the countdown (around a minute's wait). When there are twelve seconds remaining, drivers turn restive, begin honking, and start inching ahead. If you are foolish enough to stay in one place till the light turns green, you are roundly abused. Meanwhile, traffic moving in other directions shows no signs of stopping for their own red light! Thus when your light does turn green, they are still blissfully driving past, leaving you to either wait and be honked out of existence, or join the complete chaos in the intersection. Often, this scenario ends in a 'jam'. In the back seats of several of the vehicles sit young children, watching and unconsciously absorbing all this. Most adults seem to be saying, 'The road is for me. Why should I tolerate any barrier?' Far from cooperating, they are impatient and callous, and contemptuous of those foolhardy few who would like to abide by the rule of the road. It is every man for himself out there, and this is what the children see.

It is evening, and you are relaxing in front of the television. There are several stories about people, or rather, about Personalities with a capital P. Sports persons and actors appear larger than life, presented to us as perfect people whose every action and experience is somehow exciting and meaningful. Surely, they have a special skill or accomplishment which we can all admire. But the media describes their personal lives and habits more than the skill or

quality that made them famous. In these stories, money, glamour and success are made all-important. Their excesses give you a false sense of reality—a pair of golden shoes, a twenty-five-lakh-rupee ball, a six-million-rupee gun. Can you forget so easily that you are living in a country with so many poor and hungry millions? Maybe you tire of the television and decide to take a walk. Outside, you are surrounded by huge billboards plastered with the pictures of the same celebrities. They seem happier than the average person, fundamentally different from you and me. Now think of children who are exposed to all this almost as much as you are. They are quick to pick up role models (How lucky she is! I wish I could be like her!), and if they cannot emulate skill, they will imitate superficialities. Money and fame are the measure of all things; that much the children can see. They also see that when the icon falls from his exalted position, the media rushes to condemn him, eager to expose the salacious details of his fall. From all this drama, children pick up an unhealthy curiosity, a vicarious need to live any life other than their own.

Another monstrously large commercial complex has just cropped up in the neighbourhood, another place promising new heights of shopping joy. You thought there were already as many of them around as could possibly be needed, but no, it looks like we needed one more! Remember how packed and crowded the nearby mall was the last time you went? You were silently cursing the jostling crowd while pondering over whether or not to buy that particular expensive gizmo for your daughter, and decided finally that you could not afford it. At first glance, ‘If I can afford it, I will buy it,’ seems to be a reasonable decision-making strategy. It seems that desires must be gratified, and no parent would like to refuse their child what she wants. Even worse, if she does not get used to the latest gadget, she will get ‘left behind’. And there is pride in watching your child master every new technological marvel. Small wonder then that some things are becoming more and more commonplace: the child with the mobile phone, iPod on a school trip, the birthday party at a five-star hotel, the inevitable ‘day at the mall’. It is easy to buy pleasure by buying things. In the process, are not children unconsciously absorbing the message that buying pleasure will bring lasting happiness and emotional well-being?

At breakfast the other day, you noticed a curious claim on the cereal box. Eat this cereal, it said, and stay smart, stay ahead of the others. So the next time you went to the store, you read

some of the labels on these children's food items. An interesting phenomenon: several of them promise better attention, better concentration, better memory, better thinking power, in other words better performance in school! Which one would you buy for your child? But these messages are not-so-subtly underlined with the powerful message—feed your child this so he can be better than the rest. How is this possible? Even if everyone in your child's class ate and drank the same wonder product, they cannot all stay ahead. There have to be losers, and this is the central feature of competition. It sets children up for disappointment, and also for the feeling that if they do not win, they do not count. The phenomenon continues into higher education and career seeking. Courses and diplomas routinely seduce young people into wanting to be in the top few. Adult endorsement of the feeling of one-upmanship is loud and clear, and our children are listening. They learn that their worth lies in outdoing others. In the worst scenario, 'others' become just people to be outdone.

You hear your friends and neighbours say: 'My nine-year-old can read books appropriate for children five years older', 'My thirteen-year-old loves the occasional sip of vodka', 'My eight-year-old already has strong opinions: she knows what she likes and doesn't like', 'I give my fourteen-year-old son the wheel and he already knows how to drive!', 'My six-year-old is wearing a backless strappy gown— isn't she cute?' Children, or mini-adults—is there a difference anymore? Are many adults intent on pushing children into adulthood as soon as possible? One trend that fascinates and horrifies at the same time is the children's song or dance competition on television, filled with adult themes, styles and gestures. Catapulting the child into the adult world and roles distorts childhood, a unique stage of life with its own legitimate experiences. Are children learning from all this and from our impatience that the sooner they grow up, the better?

You skim down the newspaper headlines, or surf the news channels, in order to be an 'informed citizen'. Disasters, terrorist attacks, and crises of all sorts—political, financial or environmental—are juxtaposed with news about celebrities and the trivia of their lives and achievements. The media mill throws at you selected fragments of the world in random order, interspersed with glossy advertisements that can scarcely be distinguished from the format of the news items. You have a gut-level response to stories of suffering, but you are so bombarded with these contradictions that there is no space to unravel the deeper connections

between the everyday textures of contemporary life and the violence at large. Children are glancing at these news stories, too. Do they end up responding with indifference to the difficult and ugly images, and prefer the 'bright and glitzy' ones?

These are but a few sample scenarios from a whole host of daily experiences that we and our children might be subject to, and which inevitably shape our thinking and attitudes. As parents and teachers, we need to become more conscious not only of what we teach or tell our children, but of the other ways in which they might in fact be getting 'educated'. This powerful, subtle 'education' of the old and the young might be happening through our unthinking responses to situations such as those outlined above. The contradictions that we see outwardly are very likely contradictions that are seeded within, and that remain unexamined in the conduct of our own daily lives.

It is surely important then to pay attention to the 'little' disturbances and dilemmas we experience daily as we navigate the veritable minefield of contemporary life. The inward space to stop and observe, to question and think, is the 'crack' through which we might perceive the connections between the acts of everyday life and the proliferation of violence around us. And if we see our hesitant or unthinking reactions for what they are, can we not find a wholesome response capable of guiding our choices and lifestyles, of shaping a more critical relationship with the media and the marketplace?

Our children might then absorb a more reflective stance to the world they find themselves immersed in and, rather than adopt manufactured meanings, learn to look within to find their own creative responses.

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