

Childhood Explorer

Spring 2014



Exploring the Lives of Children Worldwide
Association for Childhood Education International

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Human Development

The Association for Childhood Education International approaches its mission—to promote and support the optimal education, development, and well-being of children worldwide—as a human development effort. Human development study investigates how people develop on physical, intellectual, and social levels, and explores ways to enlarge the freedoms and opportunities available to all and thereby improve the overall well-being of humanity.

Human development studies carefully probe each stage of life—and childhood is a particularly important stage for exploration, with the greatest need for attention and advocacy. It is during childhood, after all, that so much is determined about how an individual will develop into adulthood—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially.

Children are particularly vulnerable and need protection and nurturing if they are to achieve their potential and, ultimately, contribute to a sustainable positive world future. To provide the protection and nurturing that all children need and deserve, we must strive to ensure they receive a quality education; have access to health care, clothing, and nutritious food; live with loving caretakers in safe, secure places; participate in social interactions and community life; benefit from healthy physical activity and opportunities for creative expression; and have a voice in decision-making that affects their lives and the world they will inherit. (See the 10 Pillars of a Good Childhood [here](#).)

In the pages of *Childhood Explorer*, we seek to publish stories about all aspects of children's lives in varying circumstances. We will share personal reflections about the challenges children around the world face and overcome, descriptions of the programs and individuals that strive to address children's needs and protect their rights, and inspirational and intriguing accounts of childhood in all its diversity and wonder.



Birth to 3 Was Challenging

By Mark Slavin
Director of Child Development Center,
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I start as a
single living cell.



But, soon more cells develop and segregate themselves into various layers that form my brain, nervous system, skin, digestive system, muscles, bones, and circulatory system. My heart is now beating for the first time and I am receiving nutrients and oxygen through the umbilical cord from my mother. I have fingers, lips, and mouth, and I start to move for the first time. My brain is active and my brain waves are actually measurable. I plan on being one smart cookie!

I am now big enough to start practicing all my tricks. Kicks, turns, summersaults, and the occasional (or frequent) hiccups that let Mommy know I am here and developing.

I just heard the most amazing sound—Mommy's voice. I am listening to music, friends and family chatting, and even Daddy's deep voice as he talks to Mommy's tummy.

Over the next few weeks, I will grow seven times in weight and almost double in height.

Today is the big day! Daddy is in the room with Mommy. My friends and family, who I have been listening to so intently, are waiting impatiently for my arrival.

Wait a minute, it's cold out here, and everything sounds different. Well, I am not sure about this and so I am making a lot of noise. It seems to be helping. The louder I get, the more attention I receive. Okay, now I am snuggled up warm and held tight in Mommy's and Daddy's arms. My first group hug.

Alright people, I cannot move or talk much but I am ready to bond. Hold me skin to skin, look into my eyes, talk to me, and cuddle me. Don't worry; this process takes time, just relax and try.

As you work tirelessly to take care of my needs, don't forget to take care of yourselves as well. Eat healthy, exercise, and get as much sleep as I will allow. Mommy, please don't be too hard on yourself. Your schedule has changed dramatically and you are trying to do a lot on very little sleep. Just take it one day at a time and we'll all do great!

Time seems to just fly by. Mommy and Daddy, you are doing great! I have been crawling for a while and I am starting to pull myself up and even attempt a step or two before plopping back down on my bottom. Whew. I have not quite mastered the art of walking, but I am clocking some serious miles anyway by hanging on to anything I can and propelling myself forward. (Some of my young friends are not doing this yet, but that's okay. Every child progresses at his own pace.)

In addition to cruising, I am using my hands for some very important tasks, including holding a cup, picking up tiny objects, playing patty-cake, and waving bye-bye. I can also summon you with a loud and clear "Mama" when I need something—even just a hug. Don't be surprised if I protest (a lot!) when you leave the room these days. Separation anxiety is very common at my age.

I am always the life of the party, of course, but some of my friends may seem suddenly shy, which is actually developmentally appropriate. Try not to worry about it or other typical behaviors demonstrated by us 1-year-olds, such as hitting, not sharing, serious attachment to the bottle (though the time to ditch it is imminent), and picky eating. All these behaviors are normal and most likely temporary, but our growing sense of independence will lead to some trying moments.

We made it! I'm 2 and, well, not really a baby anymore. I can take off my socks by myself (although not always when or where you want me to). I can speak and be understood about half the time and may even be able to carry on a brief conversation . . . including some not-so-pretty forms of expression, such as whining, screaming, and full-out tantrums. And don't be surprised by my compulsion to ask the question "Why?" about a hundred times a day. Almost everything is still new to me, and I want to learn about it all!

I know I have been sleeping well but I think I am going to start waking up in the middle of the night again. I am not sure why. Maybe stress, fear of the dark, new teeth coming in; I am sorry, but it will be your job to figure it out and fix it.

Even though I have been walking for a while now, I think I would prefer for you to carry me . . . everywhere. If you want me to walk, I think that is a good enough reason not to. The truth is that even though I want to do everything on my own, I also need you now more than ever.

Oh, by the way, can I get a big boy bed?

I am 3 now, and I think something is happening. Why are we reading books about new babies and siblings? What happened to Mommy's tummy? Oh, Mommy and Daddy are having another baby and you tell me I am going to have a new baby sister. Okay, no worries. We have been through worse. (Like when I was 2.)

Reading me books and talking to me about my new sister is a good start. I will also benefit if you allow me to help care for the new baby as much as possible. Keeping me involved in the whole process will help me a great deal. And don't forget to make some special time just for me!

Since it appears that I am big enough to help with the new baby, this is a good time to allow me to do more things on my own. I can dress myself, brush my teeth, and even use the potty and wash my hands. I know Mommy and Daddy will be tired, but I can do a lot to help around the house. I can put clothes away, set the table, make my bed (it might be a little crooked), and pick up leaves in the yard. All this will help me feel important.

It's hard to believe I am already 3 and about to be a big brother. I hope my little sister is as wonderful as I am. I know having a perfect child like me is the only reason you decided to have another one!

So much has happened and I am truly looking forward to the next three years. But, Mom and Dad, I want you to know . . . birth to 3 was sure challenging!



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Lena's Legacy: A Dream of Education in El Salvador

Early in the morning, before 5:00 a.m., everyone is awake in La Secoya, a rural village in the mountains of El Salvador. Parents and children have bathed by pouring *guacales* (shallow plastic buckets) of cold water over their heads, despite the chilly morning air. In a mud-walled, tin-roofed house, the corn kernels are already boiling over the open fire, softening for tortilla making. Ten-year-old Valeria asks her grandma Juanita or her aunt Maria to brush her hair into a tight ponytail before she runs off with her 8-year-old brother Benjamin and her 14-year-old aunt, Tia Sarita, to catch the 6:20 a.m. truck that will take them to school in the nearest town. As in many villages in rural El Salvador, most families in La Secoya depend on subsistence farming. In many households, therefore, education must take a back seat to the daily struggle to feed the family and keep children safe. For Valeria and Benjamin's mother, Lena, education became a dream she actively pursued.

La Secoya was at the center of fighting during El Salvador's 12-year civil war, so Lena's fight for education was even more challenging. When Lena was very young, her mother was forced to carry her tiny child through the woods to escape the bombings and massacres. Eventually, Lena went to stay with a relative so that she could go to school, but the relative kept the money the family sent to support Lena for herself. Surviving only on bread and coffee, Lena became ill. She returned to her family and was again sent to school, but she had to walk a long distance even though she was still sick. Also, the family did not have enough money to pay for the

school fees that were then required. As the school shamed students who couldn't pay their fees on time, Lena gave up her dream of school and dropped out. She and her sister Maria worked for a store owner, Miguel, but he was forced to close his business after a series of gang robberies. Eventually, Lena moved back to La Secoya with her sister and Miguel, who eventually became her husband.

Yet Lena did not give up her dream. She now dreamed about her children finishing school and going to university. The small school in her village faced many challenges. Only two teachers covered classes for 60 children from preschool through 6th grade. One teacher was often ill and the other also served as the school director, and so was often called away for other meetings. Without a system for providing substitutes, school was unavailable as many as three days per week. The roof had holes, the school had few materials, and the teachers had difficulty managing the students who often left in the middle of class. Lena worried that her children could not learn enough to go to university. Some dismal statistics support her fears: the average education level achieved by children in rural areas of El Salvador is slightly more than 4th grade—nearly half that of their urban counterparts.

Lena was sure that the school in town was better. There was a teacher for every grade, teachers gave homework, children had to be on time, there were strict rules about absences, and children were not permitted to leave class on a whim. Yet transportation to the town school was a daunting challenge. It was expensive and it was not safe to let them go alone. The road to town was an hour walk down the mountain, and then they would need money to pay for the bus. The only other option was a local truck that took people into town for a fee at 6:20 every morning. Lena and Miguel worried about having enough money to pay for transportation. And they did not want to send the children alone, for fear they would be bothered by gangs.

Lena believed that parents should sacrifice for their children's education, so she decided to go with

them, every day, on the local truck and wait in town until school was over to accompany them home. She had to pay .75 each way, but the driver didn't charge for Valeria and Benjamin. Returning in the afternoon could be difficult, as some days the truck went back and some days it didn't. When it didn't, the family had to take the bus and walk up the mountain. The hard work and sacrifices were worth it, as Valeria loved school, earned good grades, and began to share her mother's dream. That dream was supported by some "gringa" volunteers who sometimes visited their village. They gave the family a transportation scholarship and, more importantly to Lena, they became role models for Valeria, who wanted to be like them—an educated woman, maybe even a teacher or a doctor.

One day, Lena could not take the children to school because of a pain in her side so strong she could not stand up. Families like hers usually suffer through illnesses without medicines, as they cannot afford to visit a doctor. After two days, she had a high fever and was vomiting; after another day, she was jaundiced and unresponsive. Miguel called the director of a local nonprofit/NGO who had befriended them. He came in the night and they took Lena to the hospital near the children's school, but the overcrowded public hospital had no beds. They sent her home. The next day, she was taken to another clinic 45 minutes away, but they sent her back to the original hospital to get authorization to go to the public hospital in the capital, another hour and a half away. Soon after Lena was admitted, however, she died. She was 35 years old.

In addition to the painful loss of their mother, the trauma for Valeria and Benjamin included the impending loss of their mother's dream for them to receive an education. For Miguel, the pain was amplified by uncertainty. Before providing for his children's future, he had to feed them. He had to work whenever he could, so it was not possible for him to accompany the children every day and wait until the school day was over to keep them safe.

But Lena's dream did not die with her. Neighbors and family members were inspired by what she was doing

for her children. When it was time to go back to school after a week of grieving time, the children were afraid to go back. Miguel talked with the teachers, who prepared the other students. When the children did return to school, one child approached Benjamin with a gift of candy and an invitation to play on the playground. The family's neighbor, Tio Pablo, keeps extra food on hand in case they are hungry after school. He has a television and invites them to watch cartoons and eat breakfast on Saturday mornings, so that they can talk to him about their mother or distract themselves at the end of a long week. Another neighbor, Anita, shares Lena's love of education and sends her older sons to the same school. They make it a point to watch out for Valeria and Benjamin at school. Two other mothers who live in a nearby town and use the same truck to get to town also keep an eye on the children, talking about how special Lena was and how well she prepared the kids to be independent, hardworking individuals. Tia Maria and Abuela Juanita make sure their clothes are washed at the river each day and see that they are on time for the truck. Maria and Anita help them with homework. Lena's friend who sells snacks by the school fence makes sure the children arrive and leave safely each day.

With the help of a strong and caring village of friends and family, Lena's dream lives on. Valeria's grades are good. She misses Lena's reminders to do her homework. But when she remembers her mother, she remembers the dream—and has made it her own.

All names of people and places are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of participants

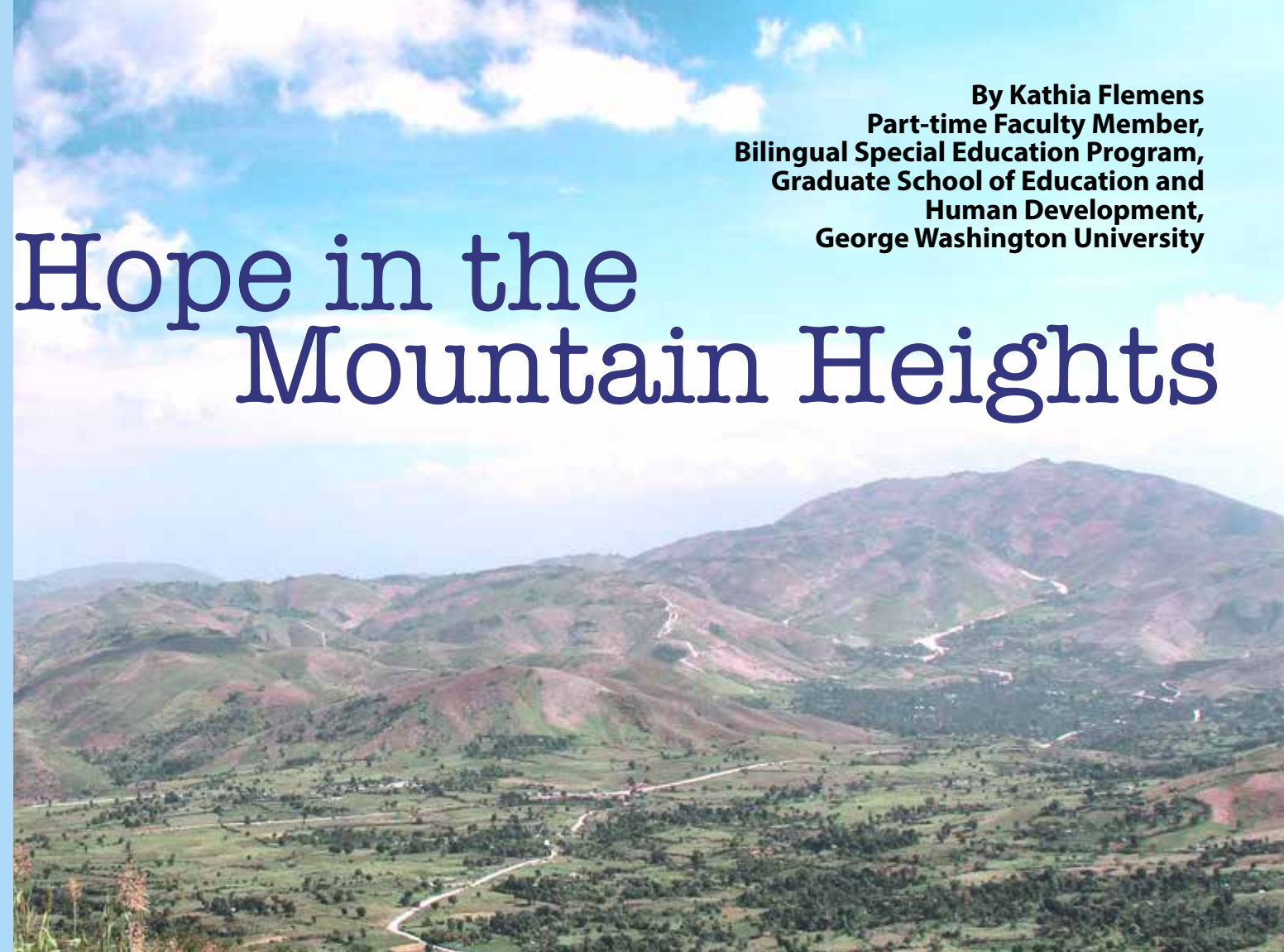


Lena





Children of Haiti



By Kathia Flemens
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Hope in the Mountain Heights

I arrived in Haiti two years after the earthquake, June 4, 2012, to manage a household water treatment program operated by Deep Springs International (DSI) in the rural parts of Haiti. Our organization traveled for a retreat to a production site in Jolieverte, a remote village on the northwest side of Haiti. As we settled into our rooms, I looked up from my things to find a pair of eyes watching me. The little girl's name is Sephora. She stared and then said, "Mwen se chef," meaning "I am chief." I smiled and responded in Haitian Creole that I had no intentions of being chief in these parts. She smiled and approached me, asking where I was from. When I told her, she started to laugh. I wondered if she lived here on the mission grounds, where she came from, and whether or not she was in school. She warmed up a bit more, asking for my name and touching my shirt. She repeated that she was the chief and told me her father was outside.

Sephora lives on a huge area of land sectioned off for Missions of Love in this rural part of Haiti. The site includes a tin-roofed cafeteria, a row of doctors' offices, medical lab rooms, clinics, and the DSI's production site for their product "Gadyen Dlo" (Water Guardians). This site is also host to many mission groups and medical missions. My 5-year-old host roamed freely on the grounds and up the mountain with her friends who lived on the site. Sephora truly was known by the community as "chief," because her father, who used to be a medical tech, works for DSI.

Life for Sephora may seem free and pleasant in these rural parts of Haiti, but that is not the case for most of the children in Haiti. Prior to the earthquake, about 500,000 Haitian children were out of school. The proportion of children out of school is especially high in rural areas. As I traveled from the northern to the southern parts of the

country, most of the children I encountered were living in abject poverty. Attending school was and still is a difficult task for some. The children remain hopeful, with dreams of becoming nurses, doctors, teachers, mechanics, or lawyers—yet they are unsure of how their dreams could be achieved.

The children were bright and enthusiastic about learning new things and meeting people. They were eager to display their knowledge, especially what they knew in English. Many of the children I met told me about their dreams and aspirations. They love school, when they can attend. Many parents lack the means to support their children's acquisition of a basic education, and keep them at home to contribute to the household income. Even with these challenges, the children I met found time to dream, play soccer, learn the words and songs of American and Haitian pop music, and work toward

achieving their goals of becoming doctors, nurses, mechanics, or athletes.

One remarkable young boy I met in Milot was 11-year-old Prophet Jess. Since it was July and school was out, he worked where he could find odd jobs during the day and played soccer when the sun started to set. He loved watching the nurses and doctors go in and out of “Sacré Coeur”—Sacred Heart Hospital up the street. He said he sometimes asked nurses questions or watched through a window to see what he could learn from what he saw going on in the hospital and the waiting room. He learned some English from interns and visitors who worked at Sacred Heart and from the music he heard playing from their rooms.

Sadly, one mother who had returned to Milot after the earthquake in Port-au-Prince explained how some parents discouraged their kids from fantasizing about becoming doctors or other types of professionals. They keep them at home or send them to work, rather than have them wounded from unrealized dreams. She explained the reality of the country and her life, noting that without the proper support from a “marenn or parenn” (godmother

or godfather), achieving such dreams is quite unlikely. Lack of proper nutrition, harsh living conditions, theft and other crimes exacerbated by poverty tend to kill the dreams of many children in this country.

It is sad to hear this from a mother. Yet, I saw many children who had learned this reality of life early on but refused to allow circumstances to stomp out their aspirations. Prophet Jess and his friends exemplified hope. They convinced me of how important it is to remain hopeful in a country that has experienced so much economic, natural, and political upheaval. They made me realize how their hopeful perspective on life contributed to their resiliency. I am convinced that one day Prophet Jess will be a top nurse in his country and that access to education will be attainable for all children in Haiti.

As for Sephora, she is truly blessed to have parents who have some education and work. I recognize that her situation is unique and an anomaly for a rural child living in Haiti; yet I pray one day this can be a reality for all children in Haiti. There is hope to be found in the mountain heights.



Shaping Children's Identities in a Muslim Neighborhood of India

Merging of Private and Public Space

When I entered the narrow city lanes, the feeling of walking back in time was overwhelming. The row houses in bright yellows, blues, greens, purples, and pinks; children running in the narrow alleyway, biking and playing ball; teens gathering at the street corners; women, girls, and children sitting tightly together on the ledges of the slender doorways watching the neighborhood happenings all reminded me of a bygone era. The women and children were almost sitting on one another's laps—the concept of “personal space” was unknown to them. They were chatting in the Urdu dialect, although they are Tamils in the State of Tamil Nadu, and it became obvious that I was in a Muslim neighborhood. The shop signs bore script in Arabic, Tamil, and English. The Arabic language is considered sacred by Indian muslims.

By Vidya Thirumurthy
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As I walked through the maze of alleyways, I saw a mosque painted white with parrot green borders, a small onion dome at the center, minarets on the four corners, and the many arches characteristic of mosques around the world. A few feet down the lane were three wood-fire stoves with huge woks—I later learned they were cooking a wedding meal. I began to think about how public and private space merged to create a larger family.

The sweet fragrance of spices was wafting in the air as I was ushered into the home I was visiting. My contact, his wife, daughters, and four grandchildren all lived together in the three-story building. While the daughters' families have separate living quarters within the building, they spend much of their time together. I greeted them, "As-salaam alaikum," and they responded with, "Alaikum salaam." They pulled a wooden arm chair, the only furniture in the living and dining room, across the brightly designed linoleum floor for me to sit on. A simple lifestyle was evident, even though this family would be considered middle class.

Religious Space Defined to Shape Identity

Religion is at the heart of this community. The calls for prayer, *Azaan*, from the minarets bring the children and men out into the streets and then to the mosque. It is magical to see so many come out in response to the call! The *Azaan* called from the minarets create a sense of Muslim space as the decree for prayer is made through loudspeakers, reminding Muslims of their religious and cultural obligations. I watched as Muslims came from all directions to pray together at the mosque, fulfilling a spiritual and social responsibility. The children did not need reminding that it was time for prayer. They just did it. The grandfather left first; all three boys followed after grabbing their caps hanging by the door. The adults modeled and nurtured the cultural and religious practices, which built a sense of belonging and pride in the children. The boys were well versed in practicing the rituals, and were proud of their community.

Arabic Space, the Religious Space

The children in this community grow up in the shadow of their grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and religion helps keep them together. They also grow up under the surveillance of their neighbors. The whole neighborhood speaks the Urdu dialect, interspersed with numerous Islamic religious terms, such as *ruku* (bowing down following the recitation of the Qur'an), *Baraka* (a flow of divine blessings and grace), and *insha'Allah* (God willing) to name only a few. Girls and boys learn Arabic and the Qur'an at the mosque or from elders in the family. Historically, Arabic has been used only by Muslims and has played an important role in shaping Indian Muslim identity.

The Principal of a Muslim School (Razeena Matriculation and Higher Secondary School) offered some insights about how reciting the Qur'an in Arabic is very important for Muslims. "If Muslims around the world did not learn Arabic language and recite the Quran in Arabic, how then could they pray together at all?" She believes any translation of the Qur'an would corrupt the uniformity and conformity and would inhibit diverse people from coming together to pray.

The convergence of people practicing the same faith provides a safe and secure environment in which children can grow and learn. In the families I visited, the grandmother played a vital role in ensuring children learned the Qur'an. I watched a 13-year-old boy learning the Qur'anic verses from his grandmother, while the younger children received instruction from their mothers on the basics of the Qur'an and Arabic. Since the oldest grandson was at an advanced level, the grandmother instructed him separately. At the mosque, I witnessed a group of 20 boys and girls learning Arabic/Qur'an. These children met every day for an hour-long lesson. A young girl I interacted with aspired to be an *Alimah*—a Muslim scholar trained in Islam and Islamic law, the legal *fiqh* (jurisprudence), just like her father. She knew that she would need to study for three more years after

graduating from high school in order to become an *Alimah*.

Raising Children, a Social Responsibility

Adults in the community were always aware of the children and often called on the young boys to run errands. Most adult-child direct communication I witnessed concerned such errands or school/homework. However, children participated peripherally in all conversations. If and when a child wanted to add to the conversation, they would whisper in their parents' ears. One young boy did so when his mother forgot to share his accomplishments in school. When children spoke out of turn, they were reprimanded by adults present—whether a parent, aunt or uncle, or neighbors. Following the cultural etiquette was clearly important.

When children outnumbered the adults in a group, they took center stage. They talked freely with me and among themselves. When I asked them if they had enough time and physical space to play, the boys immediately responded, "We can play ball or ride our bikes in the alleyway" (as no cars can enter the narrow lanes) and "We go to the terrace!" (referring to the rooftop) to play cricket. These boys seemed content with what was available. I watched the boys play cricket on the terrace and ride their bikes and play ball in the alleyways. I also noticed young girls (4 to 7 years old) running around in the street. One girl told me that she only likes to "play indoor games with my (female) friends and cousins." While the younger girls would play outside of home, the older girls often stayed indoors and spent time with their peers or adults.

Conclusion

When I was growing up, my aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, older siblings, and cousins, as well as an endless number of extended family members and neighbors, were part of my everyday life. I was scolded and reprimanded by adults when I did something wrong or did not do my homework. I was coddled and cajoled into



doing my homework by dedicated adults, neighbors, and siblings. Often, our lives intersected with friends and relatives who lived in neighborhoods that closely resembled the one described above, with the exception of the Islamic religious component.

This study provided me an opportunity to learn about the Muslim community. I realized that similar communities can be found around every mosque. The three components that these communities value are the Islamic space, the Arabic space, and the social responsibility to each other. All three nurture an Islamic identity in children. Creating such an environment helps to keep their community together in a land where they are a minority. Nurturing children into such practices is considered a social responsibility.

Resources

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Talking About Death With Young Children

a story from Nepal

By Sapna Thapa
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“Where is my father? Why is he not coming back? I need to show him my drawing. I want him to come home now. Mamu, why don’t you call him on his mobile phone? I want to become a star, too.”

Several months after 3-year-old Anushree lost her father, she refused to believe that he was not coming back. The little child’s pleas were constant reminders of the painful loss, which became unbearable for her mother, Pooja. She tried to pacify her daughter, saying “Baby, Daddy has become a star.” She explained that he was never going to come back, and directed her to stop asking about him.

When death affects the lives of children, adults often try to find easy answers for the difficult questions that children ask. We hope the young children will stop asking questions for which we have no answers. Yet, we fail to realize the consequences of these evasions on the minds of very young children. In this case, Anushree only became more puzzled and she did not stop asking for her daddy again and again. Unable to pacify her child, Pooja reached out to me for some advice. Our conversation inspired me to write this article.

In Nepal, where Hinduism is the predominant religion, rituals after a death involve isolating the immediate family (in this case the mother or wife) for 13 days to participate in ceremonies for the purification of the body, mind, and soul. During this time, young children are generally taken care of by other family members, who keep them away from the rituals and the dead body. I asked Pooja to tell me about the days she spent following these traditions and how she felt and what she thought her daughter felt. She told me that she did not remember much, but knew her aunts and cousins looked after little Anushree. Because of the family beliefs regarding evil spirits surrounding the dead, Anushree had not been allowed near her father’s dead body and was kept away from the events related to his death.

Explaining death to very young children can be a difficult challenge. Feelings of sadness, grief, anger, and



a deep sense of loss are complicated by fears about the unknown and the unpredictable. We think that by avoiding conversations about the inevitable and the unknown, we can protect our family. In our attempt to protect children, we cover up the truth and therefore may deny children the opportunity to express their own emotions and feelings of grief. We fail to notice their need for expression because we think young children are unable to understand the profoundness of death or are too young to truly grieve. We do not want to talk about loss because we feel that it will emphasize the sadness and loneliness, not only for the child but for ourselves as well.

Yet we must realize and understand that small children do mourn the loss of a loved one. Only when we recognize the reality and depth of a child’s grief and sorrow can we help them resume their normal lives.

All young children need to be heard and their feelings respected. Children will be better able to understand the nature of life and death if we have accepted them as active and legitimate participants in family events. We can help them by recalling with them happier memories of the relationship, rather than burying all memories. We need to help children to understand the cycle of life and appreciate the beauty of being, rather than develop a fear of the unknown. We should help them understand that the pain of loss will ease.

Children, no matter how young, are very observant and often understand more of what is going on around them than we imagine. In *Never Too Young to Know: Death in Children’s Lives*, Phyllis R. Silverman explains how children internalize experiences with death at different ages and discusses how we can help them deal with their grief. We can show them ways of coping with

the feelings and stress. Silverman suggests that using straightforward terminology with children, discussing the “death” instead of using euphemisms, makes it easier for children to understand the process and decode the abstractions. She explains that “a name legitimates and demystifies an event. It makes something real, gives a sense of ownership, and verifies for the child his or her ability as an observer and experience as a mourner and that sharing experiences and feelings is valued.”

Toddlers, who are in what Jean Piaget called the “pre-operational” stage and do not yet empathize with the needs of others, normally do not have a real understanding of death, but will likely show some kind of distress at the loss of a familiar and loved presence in their lives. They may continue to look for the person for several months, but will eventually learn to accommodate the new routine as normal. It is best for adults to foster a congenial environment in which the toddler can develop strong attachments with another caregiver at this stage.

Children between ages of 3 and 6 may understand that someone died, but the concept of death and its relation to sadness and sorrow is still unclear. They may even think that the dead could come back somehow if they try the right thing. It is important to understand their feelings, which may sometimes be those of anger and frustration. Adults can help the child transition into reality by explaining what happens when someone dies and that it is okay to feel sad or angry. It is vital to make the child feel loved so that he/she does not feel any kind of deprivation.

As they progress into elementary school, children begin to develop a more practical outlook. They recognize their needs and find ways to meet them, but they may not be able to control their feelings or may be confused by several feelings at one time. Understanding of death at this age is more specific and may be related to curiosity rather than emotional grief. They begin to accept the finality of death and have a deeper understanding of the rituals attached to such events, but they may not be entirely overcome by sorrow and sadness about the

loss. They may react by showing anger, sulking, or by crying at things that are not directly linked to the dead. For example, I cried after my father’s death when I was 7 years old, not because he was dead and I had lost him, but because I was angered at the hundreds of people who were trying to hug me and pat my head.

I advised Pooja to tell little Arushree the truth by saying her father died or passed, using whatever terminology suited her feelings and beliefs. I also told her to share photos and memories with Arushree about her father whenever she could, perhaps taking her to places where she used to go with her father. This was difficult for Pooja, who found it painful to face the truth about being widowed but she followed through. She told me that she and her daughter wept and shared their sorrow; at times, Arushree grew angry and threw tantrums. I explained that children have different ways of expressing their grief and that throwing tantrums or crying can be a healthy outlet. She acknowledged that it was not an easy journey and would take a long time for her daughter and herself to accept the truth.

Death is a reality of life. How we deal with our own fears and anxieties about death is of utmost importance when helping children through the loss of a loved one.

Author’s Note:


The names of the individuals have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Volunteering Is a Right —A Child’s Right

When I say that part of my work is to support and fund children’s community improvement projects,

I am often asked, “But what can children do?” My answer: “Plenty.” We do a disservice to children and to communities if we do not tap into their skills and their eagerness to contribute to the public good when they are young. I think of volunteering as a fundamental children’s right—a form of participation through which they contribute to decision-making processes and engage in actions to create change. As they do so, their social and natural environments benefit from their efforts and nonprofits/NGOs gain lifetime volunteers and philanthropists who learned at an early age that they can make a difference.

**By Silvia Blitzer Golombek
Sr. Vice President , YSA**



Children around the world are often perceived as recipients of services rather than as caregivers themselves. There is no question that they need to be educated, clothed, nourished, and protected, and that they rely on adults for basic services and loving relationships to grow up healthy and happy. But their biologically determined abilities and maturity level need not be restrictions on the broader role they can play as partners with adults in building better living conditions for everyone. Giving children opportunities to help alleviate community issues of concern to them compensates for the lack of control they have over other daily matters.

Consider the case of Marina, a 6-year-old girl from Vitoria, Brazil, who saw a cousin lose her hair during cancer treatment. “She got a wig and it made a big difference to her,” said Marina. With the guidance of an organization that runs hair donation campaigns for cancer patients, the young volunteer learned that donating her hair to help make wigs was something easy and specific she could do to help. Through drawings, flyers, photos, and even a TV news clip, she recruited others to join her in helping more cancer patients. (See <http://bit.ly/1lGamwz> and <http://bit.ly/1n3T2G5>)

Marina’s campaign was among the hundreds of child-led projects funded by YSA over the last 10 years to support children’s willingness to help their peers, their neighbors, the environment, or another cause they care about. The core mission of YSA is to encourage and support community improvement projects led by young people. Many of these projects are organized to mark Global Youth Service Day—an annual campaign celebrated every April to call attention to the participation of children and youth as active citizens. Grant applicants and project leaders for these projects are between 5 and 14 years old, assisted by older youth and adults, and are affiliated with a school or an organization.¹

Children are especially concerned about conserving resources, recycling, and protecting the environment. I am lucky to learn firsthand about projects like the one led by young students in Salta, in the northwest region

of Argentina, who learned that placing a filled bottle in school toilet tanks could save significant amounts of water when flushing. Milagros, the group’s 11-year-old project leader, explained her team’s plans to save water in 20 schools: “First, we went to our schools with a note that explained the project, and asked for the school’s help. If necessary, we also asked for the help of a plumber. In each of our schools, there are many bathrooms; in Salta, most of them use old flushing mechanisms. If the students are well informed about how to save water at school, we hope they will do this at home, too.” Milagros describes the problem-solving skills her group employed, which the children will need to apply in their future jobs and daily lives: identifying and researching a problem; determining a course of action; finding out who can help them with permissions, expertise, or resources; and communicating the project to a larger public in order to achieve the best results.

Connecting children’s interests with public needs is an effective way to engage them in service activities and thereby empower them to shape their communities. A 6-year-old boy in Argentina who trains in taekwondo received funding to support his team’s project to turn garbage into elements used in their practice. In his grant application, he wrote: “The good thing is that not only do we turn garbage into something useful, but also we learn to do our own things with materials that we already have instead of buying everything. . . . We will show other children that recycling can be a children’s thing.”

School-based projects can be very powerful outlets for children’s empathy and willingness to help, and community issues can be integrated with curriculum topics. Service-learning is a way of teaching by engaging students in community problem-solving activities that reinforce skills and concepts learned in the classroom. Guided by their teacher, a 3rd-grade class in Texas in the United States took action against childhood hunger in their state over the course of a school year. Calling themselves the Hunger Warriors, they conducted their own research into how and why childhood hunger affects their region, created several awareness videos to inform the general public about the issue, organized



a food drive, and raised over \$7,000 to donate to food banks. They also participated in the policymaking process to not only reduce hunger but also help prevent it by advocating for a breakfast bill that would increase children's participation in summer food programs. The class was present at the state capitol to cheer when "their bill" was debated and passed. Daniel, a 9-year-old Hunger Warrior, shared his commitment to end hunger: "We need to start caring for each other and do something about it; not just sit around. . . . And when I grow up, I'm not going to stop. I'm going to open a food pantry and I'm going to do everything to try to stop this" (<http://bit.ly/1VKDI7>).

Sometimes, I hear comments about children not understanding the complexity of social and economic problems. To the extent that is true, it can actually work to the community's advantage. Child volunteers have the ability to see situations clearly and simply, and are deeply moved by injustice—a good recipe for immediate action.

Children can be effective partners in addressing issues that affect their own and their peers' health and safety. Two cases, one from Northern Ireland and the other from North Tyneside in England, highlight this trait. A group of children in Ireland interested in the performing arts put on an anti-bullying play suitable for primary and secondary schools, starring children. The 13-year-old project leader described his plans: "(Our) performing arts center put on a play about the dangers of gossip, which was really good and funny and you didn't feel lectured about it. My project puts across the anti-bullying message in the same way, to interest children and make them think."

In England, a group of 7- to 12-year-olds who could not use their local park because older teens there intimidated them enlisted supportive older youth to help them create a communications campaign to regain access to the park. One of the project organizers described it like this: "We talked in a meeting about issues children our age have and a big one that came out was about differences between children and young people and that we can be scared to use the park because older people don't use it properly . . . intimidating, smoking and drinking, littering,

pushing us around in the park and making us move, hanging around in big crowds that can be scary, breaking the play equipment and being loud." Their campaign was centered on reminding the older youth how they felt when they were younger and encouraging everyone to get along.

The projects described here also reflect a characteristic common to many child-led efforts: the beneficiaries are not just other children but also the community at large. If children feel safe in a park, the elderly are also likely to feel they can use the park; when children have a full breakfast, parents' stress about a critical need is lessened; if children lead conservation efforts at home, families save money. The young volunteers themselves are empowered not only by their right to address a particular problem, but also by their increased sense of belonging and connection to the community when they can say: "We made this park accessible for everyone."

These children are exceptional, but they do not work on their own, nor should they. They are fortunate to have adults and organizations that recognize in them the capacity and the will to contribute. The young "volunteer project managers" receive encouragement and guidance from parents, teachers, community partners, and youth workers who recognize the youngsters as caregivers and problem-solvers, provide necessary resources and support, and encourage the children's civic engagement and their right to make a difference.

Children's right to participation is not only about having an opinion and being taken seriously. It is also about having the opportunity and support to make all other children's rights a reality.

Note:

¹ These projects were supported with funding from different sources, including Disney's Friends for Change program in the United States, Latin America, and the United Kingdom; and Sodexo Foundation's campaign to end childhood hunger in the United States.



Childhood Explorer

The **Association for Childhood Education International**, a nonprofit dedicated to promoting the optimal education and development of children, is proud to be offering this new publication that focuses specifically on the experience of childhood around the world. *Childhood Explorer* is an online vehicle for sharing informative and inspirational stories about childhood and about projects and campaigns that provide quality education, care, and support to children and youth in diverse communities and circumstances.

We invite you to submit short, 1- to 3-page, articles for consideration. We are seeking narrative, conversational articles that stay focused on a personal story of childhood, while connected to a global issue concerning childhood and children's education.

Visit <http://acei.org/acei-publications/childhood-explorer> for more information and to download guidelines and samples.

Topics of interest are:

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