



KPM Approach to Children
Atma Vidya Educational Foundation

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**SHANTHI WITHIN THE CHILD:
THE KPM APPROACH TO
CHILDREN**

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Introduction

All over the world, we can see familiar problems and issues that cause us deep concern. In families, we see that domestic violence and alcoholism are not uncommon. In our communities, we also see that crime, violence and a lack of regard for the rights and feelings of others are not as uncommon as we would like them to be. In our societies, aggression, terrorism and war are a pervasive feature of the geo-political landscape. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that all over the world, people are concerned about the present crisis of values and the need for values to be 'inculcated' in children of today for them to be contributing citizens of tomorrow. We want children to develop into adults who are able to value and work with others, who are tolerant, understanding, enthusiastic life-long learners, and who are capable decision-makers and problem-solvers. If we can achieve this, then we will certainly set the right foundation for more peaceful and harmonious families, communities and societies. But how can we achieve this? This is the real question that parents and educators today are facing and which needs answering.

It is submitted in this paper that educators and parents need to go back to the individual child and his sense of self-worth or inner peace for the child to develop a true sense of value for himself and for others. A person who has a deep sense of self-worth can be compassionate and considerate of others, because he has this inner surety. This fundamental sense of self-worth largely depends on a child being valued unconditionally when he is very young. It is argued that valuing a child means regarding the child's thoughts and feelings, and acknowledging and accepting his way of seeing things. A person who knows his own self-worth brings not only a willingness to risk, but enthusiasm, openness, flexibility and initiative to whatever he does. A person secure within himself has the capacity to help others and does not have the need to resort to violence to obtain his objectives.



This paper on shanthi within the child discusses how an adult may approach a child so that the child can develop a true sense of value for herself and for others. This is discussed in the context of the KPM Approach to Children, where the central theme is the value given to the child.

The KPM Approach to Children: Shanthi Within the Child

The way in which we approach a child will determine the sense of value that the child develops for himself. A child will learn to treat others the way he himself is treated. If we do not value and acknowledge a young child's way of seeing things, his feelings and his interests, then he may not develop a sense of self-worth. If, on the other hand, we do truly acknowledge and value the young child's perspective on the world, his feelings and his interests, then he can and will develop a sense of self-worth. This acknowledgement and value given to the individual child is also at the very heart of the KPM Approach to Children, an approach to children that has been practised for the past eighteen years at Sri Atmananda Memorial School, a non-sectarian school in Malakkara, Kerala. It is submitted that here, in the model school for the KPM Approach to Children, there is proof of how it is possible to help children develop a deep sense of self-worth and confidence, and an ability to value others and the environment around them. So, how is this done?

The KPM Approach to Children is based on the following paragraph written by its founder, Sri K. Padmanabha Menon:

There is a latent push in any man which is only a search for perfection. Rightly pursued, one finds this in one's awakening experience to one's real nature through the atmosphere between the real teacher and the taught. Education is only an attempt towards this. Atma Vidya Educational Foundation strives to perfect this aim.

SRI ADWAYANANDA (Sri K. Padmanabha Menon)



Inspired by this paragraph, the KPM Approach to Children is based on the relationship between the teacher and the child. What makes this different from other educational methods and approaches is that the child is valued unconditionally by the adult and cannot fail. But what does it mean to value a child unconditionally and what does the teacher-child relationship entail?

The Teacher-Child Relationship and Valuing the Child

For a child to be unconditionally valued, the child needs the adult to acknowledge her way of perception. Valuing the child without limitation means responding to a child in such a way that the child believes that you accept the validity of her way of seeing things. Through this the child develops trust and confidence in the teacher. This basic trust is not founded on "You should listen to me; I know what is good for you" but on "I hear what you are saying; I know and understand you." It is the willingness of the adult to adjust to the child's way of seeing things that enables the child to develop a strong sense of trust in the teacher. It is this relationship of trust that is central to the valuing process. So how can a teacher accept the validity of a child's way of seeing things?

The starting point for teaching and learning in the KPM model school is the child's perspective. Accepting the child's own viewpoint requires a willingness on the part of the teacher to adjust to the child's perspective. This requires patience, practice and an ability to stand back rather than impose things on the child. It also involves understanding how the child is prepared to learn. It involves taking the interests of the child seriously, joining in the child's games and listening to the child so that he knows that the teacher is there to make him happy. When this conviction is there, the child will naturally trust and confide in the teacher. Valuing the child also involves valuing the child's decisions on where to go in the school, which teachers and children to be with, what to do and when to do it. This gives the child the confidence to take risks and explore many different avenues of learning.



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In the experience of the KPM model school, where teachers are trained to adjust to the child's perspective, close relationships of trust and confidence develop between the children and the teachers. And this relationship of trust and confidence is 'life-giving' for the child. It also brings satisfaction and joy to the world of the teacher to be able to give such value and attention to the child. When the child is valued in this way starting from an early age, he develops a deep sense of self-worth and value. It is the child's self-worth that provides the foundation for learning in school and in his later life. This is why so much importance is given to it at the KPM model school. Children with a sense of self-worth will be contributing citizens of tomorrow. They will naturally develop compassion and tolerance for others.

Positive Guidance and Valuing the Child

Valuing the child does not, of course, mean allowing the child to do whatever she wants at all times. Children will get into all kinds of emotional, social and academic difficulties if this were the case. Teachers also need to help or guide children in positive directions. Children inherently need such help. However, in attempting to provide such guidance scolding the young child, humiliating her or forcing her to do something will not be productive. The consequence of such scolding or forcing will be to make the child feel that her feelings and opinions are of no consequence. If repeated on a regular basis, the negative feelings of the child will become part of her character, and the child is likely to develop a low sense of self-worth with all the adverse consequences that follow from this. Moreover, it may not always prevent the child from going in negative directions on a lasting basis. The child, of course, needs to feel valued and receive guidance at the same time. So, an important question that needs answering is, 'Can we as parents and educators give children this help in such a manner that the child does feel valued?'

In the KPM Approach to Children, although the teacher does have a sense of what is good for the child, guidance always starts from the acknowledgement, recognition, and valuing of that individual child, starting from wherever he is. This is a key point. If the guidance



does not start from valuing the child and from where the child is, then the child will feel the teacher is there not to help but to criticize. If, on the other hand, the child feels valued by the teacher, and trust and confidence is there, then it is possible for the teacher to help and guide children in positive directions, and the child will be receptive to such guidance.

For example, in a conflict situation between children, the teacher's concern will be both for the aggressor and the hurt child. The feelings of the hurt child, which are fear and pain, need to be acknowledged. The teacher needs to help the child to be happy again, without resentment. The teacher also needs to look to the feelings of the aggressor, which may be anger, revenge or frustration. Punishing the aggressor without helping him will only cement the negative feelings to the character of the child. The aggressor's feelings must be acknowledged and soothed. If the aggressor is rejected at this point, he will learn that he is a failure and no one cares about the hurt/pain he is trying to express. This is the starting point of violence against others. When these feelings are regularly understood from a young age, the inner desire for them is removed. At the same time, the teacher needs to encourage the child in the right direction, and help him see that he can achieve his aims without hurting others. But the starting point is the value given to the individual child, since this helps to provide the child with a strong sense of self-worth and makes the child open to the guidance of the teacher.

Valuing the child gives the child the freedom to develop in her own way. The child is always encouraged in the right direction. The following is an example of something that a child experienced in the model school. What is important are the feelings of being valued by the teacher that it brought about in the child:

Jeffrey, a first standard boy, was sitting on a parapet wall watching a game in progress. He looked a little discouraged and sad. A teacher approached him and invited him to join the game. "No, I'm not good at that game. I'm not fast enough," he said. The teacher thought a moment and said, "All right, but you can help me. Just look at me when I am running. You can be my source of energy. If you concentrate hard, I can run fast." Jeffrey agreed, "All right, I can do that." The teacher rejoined the game and purposefully ran fast, ahead of the other boys. He



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gave a triumphant wave each time he passed Jeffrey. By his fourth time past, Jeffrey was no longer sitting on the wall but was running along behind, having joined in his game.

When such support provides the basis of a child's education, and is provided on a regular and continuing basis, the support of the teacher gives young children the opportunity to cast aside the baggage of insecurity, prejudice, and anger and grow into whole adults while following their own, individual way of learning. Children develop tolerance and the ability to value others and work well with others.

Having seen how guiding and valuing the child can be harmonized and brought together, an important question that needs to be answered is, 'How can we combine such valuing of children with the need for academic attainment and achievement?'

Following the Child's Interests and Valuing the Child

To answer this question, it is submitted that the child's interests can serve as the basis for the academic learning. When a young child feels secure and valued by the teacher, his interests – whatever these may be - are freely and naturally expressed. If a teacher follows and broadens these interests, and introduces the curriculum through them, the child will naturally learn and develop academically. If a child's main interest is dinosaurs, for example, there are many ways to introduce the basic skills of reading and writing and other subjects such as history, geography and elementary science, through the study of dinosaurs. When the child sees how what he encounters relates to him and his interests, then any subject is potentially interesting to him. This is the experience of the KPM model school, where the teachers are trained to enter the child's world and to broaden and expand the interests of the child through planned and spontaneous activities based on the child's interests. Learning based on the child's interests is in absolute harmony with valuing the child, with all the positive consequences that follow from this. It also has other positive effects. It develops a deep love of learning in the child and, since the learning is based on the child's own interests and games, the learning stays with him.



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If the child's interests are to be used as the basis for academic learning, the teacher needs to be vigilant to use opportunities that arise to broaden and expand an interest to introduce the curriculum. If a child's main interest is cars, for example, there are many ways to introduce the basic skills of reading and writing and other subjects such as geography, maths and elementary science through the interest in cars. Such ways might include, for example, reading books on cars from the library, making a book on the different makes of car, discussing the geographical location of the different car manufacturers or Formula One racing car tracks, discussing the history of cars, how the engine of a car works and so on. The teacher is vigilant to use every opportunity that arises to broaden and expand an interest and introduce the curriculum. Learning takes place naturally and at the same time is a fun and enriching experience for the child.

By turning education from something that is forced upon the child into something that is fun and enriching, the educational process becomes transformed. Play and learning are seamlessly integrated. The child develops a deep love and enthusiasm for learning which becomes part of the child's character and stays with him. Moreover, since there is no separation between knowledge and experience for the child, he automatically applies what he learns to life's experiences. Anybody can make a game of learning, but when it is the child's own games with his liking, the learning remains with him.

The experience of the KPM model school is that children educated in the KPM Approach to Children generally do well in standardized examination tests and go on to perform well in their higher studies at university. Most importantly, this shows that we can help children to do well in their academic studies and at the same time value the children and develop qualities such as the ability to work with and value others, tolerance, compassion and inner shanthi.



Conclusion: Shanthi Within the Child

Educators and parents need to go back to the individual child and his sense of self-worth for the child to develop a true sense of value for himself and for others. Valuing the child, providing positive guidance, and following the child's interests can provide the basis for the child's integrated emotional, social and academic development. This has been successfully implemented at the model school for the KPM Approach to Children for over eighteen years now. Here, the relationship of trust and confidence between the teacher and the child provides the basis for the child's development. From kindergarten onwards, the child decides what he wants to pursue, where he wants to pursue it and who he wants to pursue it with. The child is empowered to make decisions and becomes self-directed and self-motivated. The child is also able to solve problems having seen how problems are resolved by teachers. Finding creative solutions comes naturally to him. The child develops self-confidence and a love of learning. Having been valued by others, the child values himself and his fellow beings. He naturally develops inner shanthi and becomes compassionate to those less fortunate. This sets the right foundation for more peaceful and harmonious families, communities and societies, and demonstrates the need for education to be based on valuing the individual child and developing shanthi within the child.

Further Reading

- *'Vital Impressions: The KPM Approach to Children'* by Dr. Gary Borich, Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of Texas at Austin (2003)
- *'The Child's World'* by Atma Vidya Educational Foundation (2004)

You are referred to the website at www.kpmapproach.org for further information on the KPM Approach to Children, the KPM model school, training programmes, publications, news and contact information.

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