

[Making it Relevant For Smart Young Souls](#)

Category : [October 1997](#)

Published by Anonymous on Oct. 01, 1997

EDITORIAL

Making it Relevant For Smart Young Souls

Lessons on how not to teach and promulgate our faith, including blunders we still commit.

the Editor

Readers of this month's article on the Hindu Students' Council (HSC) will encounter a dynamic movement involving thousands of modern Hindu youth who just happen to be mostly American-born. There are other such institutions. A 6,000-member UK clone, the National Hindu Students' Forum, is a potent parallel. The college-age team at the University of Durban-Westville in South Africa is another. These groups are uplifting. But they are also rare. More and more, the youth of the world are leaving their family's traditions behind. That goes for Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists, too.

Religions need a fresh approach if they harbor any hope of capturing the minds and hearts of today's young ones. In most societies--certainly rural India--kids no longer are protected from competing ideas or spiritual choices. They attend schools where they may be in the minority. They watch TV, with its undigestible buffet of values and visions. They hang out on streets or the Internet, where options are infinite and seldom high-minded. We shouldn't be surprised that kids drift from the culture. But we should be vigilant, and we must be creative in how we respond to their drifting. How are we failing? What are the problems we have in conveying our heritage to children? I asked the experts, kids, and assembled their perceptions. See if they coincide with your own:

1. Cultural differences. When a child is going to school in a non-Hindu nation, her family religious ways are viewed as odd. They compare mom's Hindu ways with friends' moms' Christian or Muslim ways. The strong will survive the test, others will succumb to a force slightly greater than gravity near a neutron star--peer pressure. A child's need to fit into her surroundings, to be like and liked by her friends, should never be underestimated. Peers can ask tough questions, some sincere, others intended to challenge or even insult--"Do you worship cows?" "Is it true you don't use toilet paper?"
Solution: Teach kids at home, or in schools that honor your family's tradition. At the very least, be sure they are surrounded by understanding friends. Otherwise, there is little one can do all day when they are out there in the Big Wide World, struggling with their identity.

2. Parents' lack of knowledge. Kids sense instantly if we know what we are talking about. If we don't understand our path, they will turn off the minute we talk about it. When they ask tough questions, we need to give honest answers. They may find some parts of Hinduism hard to believe. No problem. Let them explore various beliefs, trusting they will come to the right conclusions. Solution: Study Sanatana Dharma yourself, then pass it along.

3. Lack of practice in the home. We often want kids to have the best of the Hindu heritage without living it ourselves. Kids won't learn from this. They learn from example in the home. "Do as I say, not as I do" never works. If you are deeply immersed, they will absorb it (not right away, but ultimately). If your home puja is half-hearted, don't expect the children to be interested. If your temple visits are perfunctory and not truly devotional or meaningful to you, they will seem shallow and needless to your kids. Solution: Work on yourself. Be a good practicing Hindu. Preach less, do more.

4. Heros are too few. Kids love heros, someone they can look up to. In many nations there are just no good Hindu heros, so they turn to local athletes, musicians or movie stars. Solution: Tell them about the great Hindu women and men, how they lived, thought and acted. Read them stories. Better yet, bring them into contact with living Hindus who have made a difference. Invite Madhu Kishwar to your community or get your daughter to write to Kirin Bedi. Let them meet with inspired examples. Keep Hinduism Today on the family coffee table and point out articles that showcase leaders who exemplify

qualities your child should develop.

5. Parents need to be aware that their strictness, loving though it is and intended to guide and protect, can seem overbearing to a child, especially after 12 or so. One 15-year-old boy confided to me, "Kids have problems with parents who enforce things too much. If they dictate, then you want to rebel." This is related to trust. If parents show they don't trust their offspring, if they hold the reins too tight, they can create an unintended reaction, driving a child away, into the arms of the world. Any distrust or disrespect we give kids just comes back at us. They know you value Hinduism. If they become alienated, they will dump dharma just to strike back. Expressing your trust often and giving them a little freedom to walk on their own feet and discover the world for themselves can prevent this.

6. Befriend your children. Do things together, from an early age. Inspire them to do well, but also accept them as they are, not as you think they should be. Don't rule them, harass them or underestimate them. If you wait until they turn adolescent to do all this, it's too late. Kids tell me, "Parents think we're dumb, and we're not!" By treating kids maturely, you encourage communication with them. Otherwise, distance is made, as seen in one teen's complaint to me, "Parents pretty much don't know their kids, and kids don't want them to."

7. Fun. At a certain point in life, the number one priority is not survival, but having fun. Teens may want to be with friends or go surfing instead of to the temple. Make it possible to do both. Hinduism needs to have an element of fun in it. In India this works because of the festivals and greater social order. Elsewhere it can mean being different, strange, an outsider. Solution: Find ways to make Hinduism more enjoyable. Summer camps in America are a good example of this, as is the HSC for college-age Hindus. Such social encounters, intellectual friendships and entertainments make it a joy to be a Hindu.

Here are some sobering quotes from high school age boys and girls in Australia. If we listen to their voices, we may learn how to connect to them

again. We asked them several questions. Here is a sampling:

How has Hinduism failed you? "There are so many concepts that people can't comprehend; neither can we." "It has not provided all the answers, neither have I looked for any answers in Hinduism." "Parents do pujas blindly. They don't explain what all the things mean. We're just supposed to shut-up and hold our hands in prayer. I don't understand that." "My family doesn't stress religion much. They tell me to study, study, rather than pray, pray." "All those silly stories are, in my opinion, quite unnecessary. They confuse the young mind. Now, why do our Gods fight? Why does Muruga have two wives?" "It's just not being advertised. Compare the amount of crosses you see to the number of aums. Hindus are generally in the dark." "You say Hinduism is the world's oldest religion. Then it should have matured by now. We still worship icons. We play with fire and do other things that people find weird."

Why don't you like or take an interest in your culture and heritage? "There are many things we don't understand. Whenever we ask our parents, they dismiss the question or don't know the answer. For example, when I asked my mother how many Gods in our religion, she said she doesn't know because there are so many." "Why do we go to temples? Why do we waste time chanting old Sanskrit words over a fire? Why do we do pujas? How do we get blessing from giving food to an idol?" "Well, the ideas of karma, reincarnation and the worship of one God are interesting. But all the rest I find quite boring and useless." "Why should I? My parents don't care. We have a shrine room and all, but we just hold our palms together and sing. I don't find that interesting." "Hindus are always fighting among themselves. They are tolerant toward others, but not among themselves." "What use is an old religion in the new-modern, high tech-world? Can it help me get a job? We have to progress along with the rest of society."

All of that is Kid Reality, for which we need better responses. The words of Swami Vivekananda are no less compelling today, 100 years later, "As long as the Hindu race does not forget the great inheritance of their forefathers, there is no power on Earth to destroy them."