

## Trusting Relationships

**M**s. **SHUKLA BOSE** is the Founder – CEO of Parikrma Humanity Foundation, Bengaluru. She gave up her high profile career of 25 years and founded Parikrma, an NGO that runs four schools and one junior college that provides quality English medium education to 1400 orphaned, abandoned, slum and street children. Ms. Bose volunteered with Mother Teresa for 7 years and is a recipient of Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 1995, the Bharat Gaurav Award in 1996 and the Woman of the Year award in 2000. In this article to MENTOR, she writes about Children Safety and says, “I therefore believe that apart from being aware, having a plan, drafting a procedure manual, training of teachers and children, what plays an important role is the intent that each of us have to see our children happy and to what lengths we are ready to go to achieve it.”



I am sure that of late, like me, all of you, have been inundated with information, enquiry and suggestions about child safety in schools. It somehow appears that the responsibility of keeping a child safe and secure has been transferred to the police, governing authorities and media in general. While I may not agree with it totally, there is some element of efficacy in this shared responsibility. The police must take care of the law and order situation, the governing authorities must correct illegal practices in the name of education and the media must draw attention to many unspoken voices. But the true responsibility of keeping children safe lies in the hands of the caregivers - the parents and the school. And I think the reason some deviations happen is because many a times we forget to be that caregiver.

I do not think that the incidences of perversity have increased. Perverse sexual and social behaviour has been there from times immemorial, from the times of Socrates and Shakespeare. If you take a dip-stick survey in an honest focus group, I am sure that you will come across a large number of men and women who have encountered some kind of sexual abuse in their childhood but did not talk about it because of fear of social censure. That is changing. Many of us have emerged as more independent and confident

individuals and therefore a vast majority of us are less fearful of speaking our minds. And that is why the frequency of this kind of news in the media is becoming so claustrophobic.

Because of the unfortunate events of the recent past, the focus of our attention has got diverted to just keeping predators away. I believe that the safety of the child goes much beyond just that and is interlinked with the wholesome well-being of the child at home and at school. And this well-being is entirely dependent on the culture and value systems in the home and school. In the Parikrma schools we believe that the education philosophy of the school determines how happy and safe the children are.

In the four Parikrma schools that we have for 1600 children from 69 slums and several orphanages, we have to make special effort to create a safe environment because our children come from dysfunctional homes ravaged by poverty. This task has not been very difficult strangely enough. And that is because we have teachers who have joined us with the sole purpose of giving the childhood back to these underserved children. We expect our teachers to be more than teachers, to be surrogate parents. Once we successfully bring that spirit of nurturing in place, the entire dynamics of the school



changes. We have many human security cameras all over the school that have to keep the children not just safe but also happy. It is important to be alert not because one fears but because one cares.

The Parikrma school motto is to Love, Explore and Excel and we believe that every individual, whether an adult or a child, must learn how to love each other, love oneself and love life itself. It may sound either too simplistic or esoteric but let me assure you that if it is possible to embed these elements in everyday living and in all school activities, then loving, exploring and excelling with the children does work. That is the reason that although our children have many more attractive choices outside the school, they come to school regularly because they like to come to school. Our children want to come to school even though there is no one at home to force them to do so. We therefore have had more than 96% attendance and less than 1% drop the last twelve years.

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Wholesome health and well-being of children in school can happen when children have a sense of freedom to speak their mind, to participate in decision making and get a chance to participate in creating the school culture. Children can feel unsafe even with each other when there is bullying in school. It is therefore very important to foster a climate of respect and trust all around. We have to reinforce at all levels of the school community positive behaviour, respectful interactions and pro social behaviour. We have to ensure that teachers, staff, and administrators take fair and consistent action when they learn of



a situation that might require intervention and discipline. We have to teach and encourage students to use conflict resolution, peer mediation, active listening and other non-violent ways to solve problems. We have to develop anti-bullying programs and educate students, parents, teachers, staff and administrators on what steps to take if they know bullying is occurring.

Trusting relationships between adults and students are the product of quality connections, respectful communication and frequent interactions. Schools, in which students feel connected to each other and to adults, promote a safe educational environment and encourage communication between students and teachers. It is important to ensure that each student has a trusting relationship with an adult, whether it is a teacher, coach, member of the custodial staff, a school nurse or the counsellor.

Whenever there is an unpleasant incident in school everyone presses the panic button and starts to fortify the school. In my view schools are supposed to be places where parents entrust officials to oversee the development and education of their children, not pen them in. Traditionally, openness is unfettered by fear of physical or emotional violence. Turning our schools into armed fortresses would be



counterproductive, unrealistic and for the vast majority of our children, entirely unnecessary.

I think it is very important for schools to have long term strategies to prepare the children and staff of the school to deal with emergencies of all kinds.

Children should know who to call, what number to dial and where the emergency phone is kept. Schools need well-designed disaster preparedness plans that are familiar to staff and students and that have been practiced regularly. I think it is important for schools to constantly promote communication. Schools have to foster a climate where students feel comfortable sharing information they have regarding a potentially threatening situation with a responsible adult. Teachers and students need to become aware of situations which will make them notice and report behaviour among their peers and teachers that seems concerning or the presence of people who do not belong in the school at all.

It is important that students, parents, teachers and staff are familiar with how to report behaviour or communication they learn about that raise concern. Such behaviour and communication includes, among others, expressions of hopelessness, knowledge of drug use, suicidal gestures or statements, depression, gang activity, threats of violence and problems outside of school that negatively impact the student's learning and well-being.

Finally, parents have particularly important responsibilities in making our schools safer. They should talk to their children calmly and reassuringly about the true rarity of these horrific events that have happened and not get our children lose trust in all adults and life itself. If the school authorities and parents have transparent communications on a consistent basis and not get involved in any blame game, it is then that the children will

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feel truly safe. In Parikrma what has worked is that we have actually hired our parents as our non-teaching staff. They are treated with respect and dignity and in return they are our best allies in the community. In mainstream schools the same spirit of trust and working together for the child can come in if parents are hired as teachers. I think this culture of working together as a family has the most powerful impact in the health and the well-being of the child.

This is how a nurturing environment is created in the school which promotes sensitivity and tender handling of the children. And this spirit also inspires very diligent and vigilant interviewing of teachers and staff members before they are invited to enter the family circle. Appointment of teachers is a marriage alliance where all the checks and balances are to be made before the decision is taken. And much of the decision is based on the attitude of the person, his or her sense of joy, willingness to learn rather than just possessing skills and degrees. If as school administrators we shift our priorities to the children's measurement of joy and happiness rather than just learning, then I believe that children will feel safe and secure and learning will automatically happen.

I therefore believe that apart from being aware, having a plan, drafting a procedure manual, training of teachers and children, what plays an important role is the intent that each of us have to see our children happy and to what lengths we are ready to go to achieve it. And schools must learn from each other rather than constantly competing with each other.