

Three M-s of Balavihar Brahmachari Uddhav Chaitanya

Pujya Gurudev Swami Chinmayananda believed that, "Children are not vessels to be filled, but lamps to be lit." Chinmaya Mission's Balavihar program is geared to helping children channelize their abundant energy and exuberant enthusiasm in the right direction.

The purpose of Balavihar is not just to impart religious education, but to help the children develop self-confidence in their own identity, so they can relate with ease to any person or situation. This is accomplished by:

- Building a strong foundation by imparting the fundamentals of Hindu beliefs
- Introducing them to the richness and diversity of Hindu culture
- Inculcating values, morals and ethics as described in our scriptures through stories, games, discussions, arts and crafts, and other age appropriate methods

How can these goals be accomplished? By creating an environment where children are allowed to form friendships and bond with each other so that coming to Balavihar is a "pleasure, not pressure." Parents do not need to force or bribe their children to attend. The children's talents are nurtured and allowed to unfold naturally. Balavihar should be a platform that provides them with avenues to excel in their own areas of expertise, so they can exhaust their existing *vāsanās* without creating new ones.

As Hindus in the US, we have been successful in creating a niche for ourselves as accomplished professionals and savvy business people on an individual level. We also need to focus on the needs of the community, especially the younger generation because as the cliché goes, "United we stand." We need to learn from the example of other communities and extend our places of worship to include areas that provide our youngsters a "cool" place to "hang out" with their friends. This is in keeping with the Hindu tradition of maintaining the focus on the Lord in the sanctum sanctorum, while allowing socializing and other activities in the periphery.

In keeping with that spirit, we should organize activities like lock-ins, movie nights with pizza and popcorn, going for laser tag or bowling, a special surprise outing once a year. . .good, wholesome fun where the children feel they can "chill" with their friends with minimal parental intervention.

There are 3 key components of a robust and dynamic Balavihar program:

- The message (curriculum)
- The messenger (teacher)
- The method in which the message is delivered (various strategies used to bring the message home)

We will not get into the specific details of the curriculum itself here, but it is very important that it be multi-dimensional, not just *bhajans*, *shlokas*, and stories. There are enough websites that can provide all these resources. There should be a structure, but it should not be structured like the school curriculum. The teachers should create an environment where the children are on their toes in anticipation, wondering "what next."

The next key component is the messenger. We need a team of dedicated teachers who are willing to make a long-term commitment. Ideally, each grade level should have two teachers, so there is always a back-up. Many parents want to serve in this capacity, but are unsure if they can do it. There is only one requirement for being a Balavihar teacher: Do you love kids and have their welfare at heart? Love does not mean pampering or being bossy and strict, but can you relate to the kids as one of them? If you have this basic qualification, then it does not matter if you have not taught before, that you cannot sing *bhajans* or chant *shlokas*. There are many

resources available that can help you overcome your deficiencies, but there is nothing that can overcome a lack of love.

Along with love, teachers need to be patient, willing to listen and have the ability to discipline, not by being strict, but by creating a rapport with the students. This teaches the children an inner discipline that does not need to be enforced externally by any authority. In order impart this self-discipline, the teachers must set an example by being punctual, regular, and consistent, otherwise they will lose the trust of the students.

Teachers must treat the children as individuals, not talk down to them, talk to them as friends, and reach out to them without teaching or preaching, become their buddy. When this happens, instead of you giving them stickers, they will give you stickers. Do whatever it takes to relate to them at their level, even if it means signing up for Facebook!

Another key qualification for a teacher is to not have his or her own personal agenda. The teacher should not go into the class with the mindset of just completing the curriculum. Completing the curriculum is important, no doubt, but it is not an end in itself.

Besides teaching, there are ample opportunities to serve in several ancillary areas:

- Organizing activities like camps, lock-ins, picnics etc.
- Keeping track of and replenishing classroom supplies
- Managing stage props and costumes
- Stage decoration for festivals and other special events
- Teaching music, dance or regional languages
- *Gita* chanting
- *Shlokathon*

This team of dedicated teachers and volunteers needs a leader, a coordinator who is capable of assessing and leveraging the assets and liabilities of each teacher, without placing undue emphasis on the liabilities because teaching is, after all, an opportunity for the teachers to learn how to smoothen the rough edges of their own personalities. The role of the coordinator is to:

- Actively recruit teachers and other volunteers, not wait for them to come
- Delegate effectively
- Create sub-committees to coordinate all Balavihar activities
- Coordinate Balavihar requirements with the administration
- Come up with policy manuals, handbooks etc. as needed
- Above all, make all teachers and other volunteers feel they "belong" in the group as members of the extended Chinmaya family.

Last, but not least, is the method by which the message is being communicated. Here are some suggestions for adding value to the message:

- The number one complaint that children have is that the classes are boring and repetitious. It is important to cover the topics in the curriculum, but it is even more important to not "go on and on. . ."
- Do not ask the kids what they have learnt every Sunday.
- Highlight the teachings of other religions in the context of showing how Hinduism is the only one that accepts all, rejects none.
- Try and include as many of the kids as possible in class presentations and festival celebrations. Coordinate with other classes and do a joint presentation. The group dynamics can be very different when two or more classes are engaged in a cooperative endeavor.
- Create structured lesson plans based on the curriculum. Try and get lesson plans from different centers to see how other teachers are dealing with a specific topic. The CM

Dallas website, www.chinmayasaaket.org has lesson plans for some of the grade levels. They are not perfect, but can be copied and used as a reference.

- The text book is a resource. Do not read from the book in the class, especially when telling a story.
- By the evening after every Balavihar class, teachers should send an email to all the parents with a brief synopsis of what was covered in class.
- Parents should also be given a comprehensive picture of the syllabus, calendar for the entire year. This will go a long way in creating trust in the parents and helping them realize that Balavihar is not an arbitrary program conducted according to the whims of the individual teachers.
- One of the key elements of the Chinmaya Mission Pledge is service, "Producing more than what we consume and giving more than what we take." Keeping the pledge in mind, we must teach our children to give back to society by getting involved in various service projects, not just in India, but in the local community. This is truly Vedanta in practice (VIP) and will help to bring the message home more than any amount of classroom teaching. We should talk to the kids and have them come up with a plan of action and a deserving cause. One of the successful fund raising activities organized every year by the senior class at CM Dallas is a Walkathon. Some other ideas: organizing Read-a-thon of Pujya Gurudev's books where kids seek donations per page or per book, helping children in foster homes etc. This would teach kids to give with an open heart in a spirit of selfless service, without a feeling that they are serving those who are less fortunate than them.

When we pay attention to all three aspects: the message, the messenger and the methodology. and deliver on our promises, Balavihar will grow effortlessly and exponentially. When the parents see how much the children are benefitting from the program, they will realize that what they are paying is peanuts compared to what they are getting in return. What they are paying for can only cover the operating and administrative costs of the facility. Satisfied parents will provide the best publicity. No need for a marketing strategy or an ad agency. Word of mouth from parents will be enough to do the job. The value of the education imparted at Balavihar cannot be measured in terms of money. Where else can you get an ROI like this?