

Educating Our Children's Hearts: A Mother's Reflections on Home-Schooling H by Meghna Banker

Thank you for inviting me here. I will probably be sharing less from the perspective of a teacher, but more from the experience of a mother. Very early on, even before my child was born, I had the privilege to be located in a place where Gandhi-ji has spent so much of his life. Lot of the experiments in education and lifestyle, values had begun and thrived over there. I think the seeds were starting to be sown right in those moments.

When I was to become a mother I had such beautiful welcome messages for the baby and how this baby is going to be shaped into this world. What are the values that the baby is going to learn and what kind of a person that he or she is going to grow up into and that is when I paused and I realized the importance of my role in my child's life and I remember very clearly so many of my teachers were mothers. What if a mother became a teacher?

I started stumbling upon a lot of research and experiments that were done in the field of education on nurturing and child and I just took that thing upon myself. So I'm not an activist. I don't believe in non-education. I am super pro education and I want every child in this world to be educated. It's just that I am experimenting - experimenting in a different way - and I don't know how that is going to turn because I am just five years into that experiment. But the more that I am growing into that process, I am realizing at my gut level that this is probably the right way for me and my child.

In that sense, both my daughter and I are actually going to school together - and that school is this whole world. We go into farms, we go into communities, we go into spaces, we come here. My daughter is even sitting in this audience, and this is all part of her education. One of the things that really struck me when I was at the Gandhi Ashram was how can we work at the unison of our head, hands and hearts, which Gandhi-ji said. That was my first trigger: How can that be my foundation, even in education?

So why I choose to experiment, how can I cultivate myself? The first experience that I had right when my daughter was very young - probably three months old - and someone just exclaimed, she told me, "Your daughter she lifts the pen just like you do!"

And it just hit me that she is constantly looking at me - the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I lift stuff, the way I put stuff, the way I organize stuff, etc. I realized the first step for educating her was to educate myself. How can I "be-the-change"?

Because children just catch things. They cannot be taught. They don't have the vocabulary to understand, especially when they are very little. So the only way they learn is their parents and oftentimes, a large portion of that influence is their mother. So I realized that the mother is the first person who has to start shifting. I had to start

embodying certain principles, like not lying, not bribing, being kind, being compassionate. And it cannot be faked, because children are so intuitive that they just catch on. So I had to genuinely work hard at it, and that has been one of the major steps that I do.

One of the ways that I experiment mostly in introducing concepts to her and the biggest role that I have in my hand is her curiosity. Her questions are my triggers to explain concepts of how I can bring forth education in her.

One day, we were going out of town -- actually out of the country -- and I had to explain jet-lag to her, in the sense that when there is sun in the other part of the world, the moon is on our side of the world. She became completely absorbed with that idea. So the first thing that we did was we brought her a globe and a flash light from my mobile phone and we created a little bit of a solar system at our home with just those tools and we explained how planets rotated and the sun and the moon stayed in their own places and when one side sees the light the other side sees the darkness and she completely got that and that was it for that conversation.

Few days later, she comes and tells me, "Mama, why does the planet rotate?"

As a parent, is it my responsibility to say, "Oh you are just four years-old and you are not going to understand," or "Should I simplify this concept and explain to her why planets rotate?" And so, in whatever language, we had a conversation on gravity. Now somebody else may think that a four year-old need not understand gravity, and first needs to strengthen her foundation of A-B-C-D's and 1-2-3's. But she was ready. She wanted that answer, and as a parent, it was my responsibility to communicate that to her. And so that experiment still continues. Her questions are the biggest resource.

Thankfully or unfortunately lot of my friends who are also her parents who are also her teachers land up to be praise. Thankfully, they are being so cooperative that they answer to her inquisitiveness in the same manner. So in that sense it literally takes a village to educate a child and it actually takes a village to raise a child and so in that case I am not the only parent. The world is her parent, animals, trees, humans everybody becomes her parent and her teacher and how can we facilitate that interaction more and more is something that I constantly cultivate.

Creative Learning Methods

"When educating the minds of our youth, we must not forget to educate their hearts."
-Dalai Lama

One day, I was teaching her how to paint and I saw that most of her energy went into dipping the brush in color and then whole chunk of the color would just be dissolve in water and as an impatient mother I was thinking, "I am trying to teach you how to paint on paper and what are you doing? This is not what you are supposed to do. You have to do this way."

But she was three years old and she is not going to bother so much. She was having so much fun dipping the brush in the color and putting it in the bowl, and pretty much within an hour, half the color bottle was over! And I just sat there, with my hands on my head, thinking "Oh my God! This goes down the trash!" And soon after she exclaimed, "Mama, when I mix pink and blue, it turned purple!"

I was surprised. While I was thinking that she was wasting color and paper, she was actually learning! What would otherwise have been a very theoretical experiment turned

into a very practical experiment, which she discovered on her own.

Even in other spaces, I come across so many parents who use creative methods. There are two friends, a couple, who are educating their child at a farm. And he is learning all these concepts through plants and trees and through farming. So I ask myself how I can continually start to research more and more on these creative methods that already exist, and that we as children have also learned. Children have no rules when they are playing games. How can that-- no rules but yet subtly a parent including rules with the children don't understand can -- be inculcated in a very day-to-day matter. So she doesn't have a whole day set into curriculum, but rather, a whole day turns into a very creative learning experiment.

One of the things I realized when I saw many kids (I have come across a lot of kids who go to school also) is that everyone has a different way of understanding concept. For me, my basic research really developed from my own child so I am just speaking from those experiences. When I grew up, I understood literature very well so everything that was turned into a story became my way of learning and understanding concepts. Some kids understand through art, some understand through math and games, but how I as a parent or a teacher can turn those experiments into real life ways of really tuning into concepts in education?

I am generally a designer. I work on Photoshop and illustrator. When my daughter sees me work on the computer, she is always very curious of what she does and so she wants to work with me on the exact same thing that I do and so she sits with me on illustrator, a professional design software and she starts to mess with buttons, and in that process, sometimes she lands up teaching me things! There will be many a times when she will find something new. I will ask her how, and she will tell me, "Oh, I pressed this, and I pressed this, and then this happened." That is where I realized the importance of media and tools - that they can also be used as an advantage to teach children so much more.

So this is just part of the process. My main concern was actually teaching values. How can I cultivate these values? I remember there was this one friend. We had gone to her house, and suddenly her child got very angry. I think he was five-and-a-half at that time and he even started punching his mother. All of us were wondering what is going on, what is this child doing, and he kept punching. This mother was constantly hugging her baby tighter and tighter and tighter, and she kept kissing her. I thought, "Oh my, if this was my child, I would probably have raised my hand, but this mother is constantly hugging him!"

She ended up taking him to one corner and they had a conversation for half an hour. When she came back, I asked her what happened. "I mean, how much patience do you have?" I marveled. "This kid was literally punching you in your stomach, and all you did was hug him and kiss him, and you had an half hour conversation about what it was all about?"

She said, "You know there are so many guests at our house right now, and my son has this habit of spending some time with me, but because of the guests, I am not able to give him so much time. So he is just angry, and he is using his anger to grab my attention. So I can choose to respond him with a slap, or I can choose to understand what is at the core of his nature— what is it that is at the core of his problem— and how can I handle that?"

That was a huge learning. Not only that child but from then onwards, whenever I would see another child throwing tantrums or misbehaving just as Vijayam-ji shared, there is always something at the root that is bothering them, and I think that needs to be

addressed as compared to reacting to what is happening at that moment. That incident shaped so much of my own parenting journey. I am not completely successful at it, but at least it has made me more mindful about how these values can also be brought into my daughter's learning.

There was this one story this person shared. One of the major things that has been on my radar is how can children be genuinely so empathetic? They have so much compassion that is already within them, that is constantly teaching us. So this one person asked one of our very beautiful mentors, "If there is a spider web, and there is a spider who is about to eat a moth, and a child is watching, what will you do? Do you let the spider eat the moth or you save the moth? Do you explain to the child that spider eating a moth is part of the circle of life, or you save the moth and let the spider be hungry?"

The response that came back was, "When a child is watching, save the moth, because the child is filled with empathy and you only want to strengthen that. But, as an adult, if just you are watching that, be aware that this is a circle of life, but also have compassion for the spider. And that is our responsibility to not just say that, "Oh this is just a circle of life," but also to understand the responsibility of that circle of life." And that has shaped so many of my interactions with my own daughter.

Leveraging Media To Explain Values

In that, books and media have been a huge source of inspiration in how I try to explain these values. They have really made my job super easy. A lot of kids are now refrained from are watching princess movies, but I encourage that. It doesn't mean that we let the child watch what they are doing, but the parent's involvement is 110 % into what they are doing.

When my daughter is watching a princess movie, apart from having her own enjoyment, we also have a conversation. We have our own circle of sharing and dialogues on what are the values of Cinderella, what is the value of Belle, and so she immediately responds that Cinderella feeds the animals and she takes care of the people, the people who are mad at her. She still shows compassion to them.

And these perspectives are constantly strengthened throughout her day-to-day activities and experiences. There was one personal incident that had happened where I had really thrown a lot of rage at her. I was angry for something else, which of course comes out on your child. The parent is not perfect either. So it was very interesting, because she was so hurt at that moment that she decided to go back to her room. And in such cases, if I were her, I know I would have probably just cried and wondered, "Why is mama doing this?" or "Why is papa doing that?"

But instead, she just closed her eyes, folded her hands, and she started praying. She started praying to God, and she said, "Can you please make my mama smile? And can you please make her happy? She is very angry."

I overheard that and I went up to her and I mentioned another animation movie, which was, of course, Beauty and the Beast. Earlier, we had this conversation that the beast is not a bad person, but it's just that he is not loved enough. The character Belle teaches him how to love. That "Beast" and "Belle" exists within all of us. So the clarity that people are not bad, but their actions are sometimes not in balance, has been so imbued in her. It's a great reminder for me as a parent, also. And these interactions are not only shaping her, but they are shaping me. They are just acting as a reminder of how we can continue to cultivate lines like this: "The more you take, the less you have."

While watching a movie one day, my daughter asked me, “What does this mean?”

Isn't that such a great conversation to start with a child, and really talk about where is the need and where is the greed? It is very easy to explain to the child that asking for a lot of toys can become greed. But being okay with what you have is also a theme, which can go on for multiple conversations. We had a beautiful conversation after that, and she continues to use this statement wherever she goes.

When she is offered more than one chocolate, she'll say, “The more you take, the less you have.” And she just returns the chocolate! I can't even do that. I don't follow that many times, but when you see it through the lens of your child, you cannot help but follow the same practices.

So it is really a co-learning. Sometimes she is my teacher, and sometimes I am her teacher. Most times the world is her teacher, including those little ants. So a lot of my experience in communicating values come from media, but it's monitored media. No extremes.

The Value Of Learning To Fail

One of the things that I realized—one day somebody asked me, “If your daughter doesn't go to school, how is she going to learn competition?”

I remember asking that person, “Why can't she learn co-creation and collaboration? Why does she have to learn competition?”

It brought a very big aspect: because she doesn't go to school she is not used to failure. So we started creating failure games at home. We bring a bunch of people and we will celebrate who ever fails, because the other person [the 'winner'] feels so happy. That became a part of our routine, and sometimes, she will even cheat to fail (so that is also an edge, to not cheat), but it is fun to see a child lose and really celebrate failure. In that sense, even as a parent, it is a reminder for me to really be okay with whatever life throws at you. But how can you build your own character, even if it's through failing?

And another bigger aspect that I realized was the disparity between the poor and the rich, and how can that bridge never come into their way. Luckily, the community that we are involved in has so many varieties of hearts that are unified in that process. It is constantly beautiful to see that the definition of “rich” and “poor” does not really exist in our dictionary, because [being "rich or poor"] has nothing to do with what our financial statuses are. This is an ongoing experiment, and I constantly encourage my daughter to play with kids who live in the surrounding slum community. She goes there, she eats with them, she plays with them. Because of that friendship that she shares with them, she has never really seen that disparity.

I realized many times while growing up that I have this duality in my head—that “Oh, some people are rich and some people are poor.” I still have hard time dealing with people who beg on streets when they come asking for food and money, but it is interesting how a child's perspective of friendship really breaks down these barriers, and evolves you into thinking how much more can you include? How many more people you can include? No matter whether someone is disabled or whether blind, I notice my daughter has this immediate nature to help. Every child does, I have seen it. It's not just her, every child has this innate capacity to help someone. It is very natural. It is just that we mostly tell kids, “Don't talk to strangers, it's not a good thing to do.” But if you do

encourage that, their conversations can really melt the toughest of heart. I have seen that in action. So, we can constantly bring those into the perspective of education has also been a huge shift for us, and a community really helps build that bridge deeper.

“Be the Change You Wish To See In The World.”

In the end, I always say, “Be the change that you wish to see in the world.” It is a very common statement, but a very powerful statement, and a very difficult one to practice.

I realized it very early on and I still cultivate in that. When I listen to Nipun-bhai, and when I listened to Vijayam-ji, when I interact with so many people, there is so much which already going on for our future, but so much is also happening in the now. How can this “now” be constantly emphasized in the practice of education, and in its values” That eventually becomes the foundation of what the future is going to be. And it’s a constant process. For me, also as a parent and as a teacher, it’s a constant process. But as Vijayam-ji says, gratitude is the biggest foundation of everything that so many of us are doing.

It is privilege to be born in this era. Because the work is already done; the foundation is already set for us. We just have to recognize that foundation and really build on it, and not come up with new concepts that create contradictions or competition - but rather, to really see what works effortlessly for one. And there is no right or wrong.

Everybody has a different environment they grow up in. Everybody has a different environment inside, also. And how can we respect the environment of a child’s inner self? Or a parent or a teacher’s inner self? And how can we use that as shoulders, as strength, to build on rather than being impressed by something that is just happening on the outside and trying to have everything? That has been my constant effort.

Thank you for listening, and thank you again for inviting me.