

New Study Curriculum for Children To Begin This Year

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One day the 5-year-old son of a Dallas member came home from school trembling and full of wide-eyed questions. Someone had asked him: "Do you believe in God? 'Cause if you don't, you're going to hell!"

The boy's mother struggled for an explanation, a struggle that put her squarely in front of the Gohonzon — and ultimately resulted in the development of a study curriculum for children at the Dallas Culture Center last summer. This member's efforts were met with enthusiasm and a sense of relief by others whose children were having similar experiences.

In fact, a sense of urgency and mission that we must teach our children to understand and speak with confidence about their practice of Buddhism has been developing over the past several years throughout the SGI-USA, from the grassroots up. The combined efforts of concerned members has resulted in an exciting new study curriculum for the Boys and Girls Group, which is now available nationwide.

Spearheaded by Palma Odano, one of the national coordinators for the Boys and Girls Group, and supported with feedback from Boys and Girls Group representatives in every joint territory, a suggested outline for study with plenty of support materials drawn from SGI President Ikeda's lectures, *The New Human Revolution* and the Gosho will be implemented beginning this month.

The outline and packets of information (which will be sent to the joint territories on a monthly basis) comprise a suggested, yet flexible, model to be utilized as best serves the needs of each area.

According to Mrs. Odano, each joint territory will have the opportunity to research a particular month's study focus and then develop the materials for the entire country.

Suggestions from the children are also being gathered and a request for their input will appear in the "Friends for Peace" pullout section, which will now appear monthly in the *World Tribune*.

Mrs. Odano and the national committee have been working steadily over the past year to complete the curriculum with two major challenges in mind. The first is to support the adults' efforts to make each child feel that he or she is a vital part of the community center and a treasured member of the organization.

"We can hardly blame the older youth who may not feel like being active," Mrs. Odano said, "if, as children growing up in the practice, they were primarily told to be quiet and stay out of the way." She emphasized President Ikeda's guidance to "speak to the adult" that exists within every child and to "never treat children casually or patronize them because of their young age."

The second major challenge for the committee is to find ways to help children understand their practice and develop confidence in speaking about their beliefs. In school, at ballet lessons, on the soccer team and in countless other situations, Boys and Girls Group members experience the pressures and often the difficulties of belonging to what may seem to their peers an exotic and even strange minority.

One longtime Dallas member tells a story that speaks to this point: She recounts her

difficult childhood, growing up in one of the few Jewish families in her community, remembering the constant risk of facing cruelty and ostracism that so often accompanied her identity as a Jew.

As an adult, she became a Buddhist and raised two children in the practice. When she asked her now-teenage children how, as Buddhists, they responded to their friends' questions about their religion, her children answered: "Oh, it's no problem, Mom. We just say we're Jewish."

It is indeed a challenge for our children to grow up Buddhist here in the Bible Belt — or anywhere in the United States — and it is a challenge that requires the effort and support of each member.

The implementation of this study curriculum for our children is intended to help them appreciate the history, basic principles, inclusiveness and spirit of tolerance of this great religion.

As Mrs. Odano said, "It is joyful to teach these children about this great philosophy, to see them catch President Ikeda's vision, and to know they will have such a great impact on our society."

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