

**PARENTING AND BOYS & GIRLS GROUP COORDINATORS CONFERENCE
HELD AT FNCC
BY STEPHANIE NATKINS, LAWRENCEVILLE, N.J.**

I have five children; the oldest is 8 and the youngest are 1-year-old twins,” Los Angeles member Janet Vinograd explained. “I work full time. When I get home, it feels like everyone is competing for my attention. If I’m holding one baby in my arms, the other is clinging to my leg. In the next room, two of my kids may be fighting. Sometimes I just lose it. I feel overwhelmed. How do I divide myself up so that I can give each of them the attention they need?”

During the four-day Parenting and Boys and Girls Coordinators Conference that ensued, the concerns of the many SGI members who had trekked to the Florida Nature and Culture Center seeking answers to difficult questions like Janet’s, were addressed in depth. The issues motivating each member to come were varied.

Lynn Freeney, a recently divorced single father of 10- and 13-year-old children, came seeking direction on how to raise his two children alone. Daniel and Susan Leieritz, the young parents of a 15-month-old daughter, came because they “wanted to learn to do the job of parenting right, from the very beginning.” Bruce Miller, a Boys and Girls group coordinator from the San Francisco Bay area, spoke of his desire to share ideas and activities that are being used successfully by Boys and Girls groups around the country. “We have a responsibility to help these children grow up feeling good about themselves. I want them to know that all their efforts within the SGI are appreciated by the adults around them.”

Both women and men, mothers and fathers were represented at this first SGI Parenting and Boys and Girls Group Coordinators Conference. Among those in attendance were five husband-and-wife teams. No matter how varied their specific concerns, a common thread united the many attendees: the conviction that every child is a precious treasure deserving of our deepest love and respect. This sentiment was given voice in the conference mission statement that was read by Anne Martin, a Philadelphia member and contributor to its formulation:

*By sharing the basics of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism,
President Ikeda’s heart and the importance of the SGI,
we are committed to fostering hope, courage, and
confidence in our children.*

*Acknowledging the absolute value of each and every child,
we will nurture, support, listen to and stand up for the
rights of all children.*

Together, we will create a “new century of peace.”

Workshops for parents and Boys and Girls Group coordinators were given on such topics as: Motivating the Unmotivated Child, Communication Skills That Encourage Family Dialogue, Parenting Young Children 1–4 Years, and Active Parenting of Teens. In addition, there were Boys and Girls Group Activities Workshops and information sessions regarding new publications for children. During all the sessions, there seemed to be an invisible

bond of magnetism between instructors and participants. The eager participants pulled wisdom from the knowledgeable instructors like hungry diners seeking sustenance at a long-awaited feast.

Kathleen Tracy, an elementary school principal and parenting instructor from Lakewood, Wash., discussed, among other topics, the three styles of parenting: autocratic, permissive and democratic. Participants at her workshop learned the importance of enabling a child to establish good self-esteem and self-concept as a precursor to becoming a capable human being. The listeners discovered that each parenting style has its strengths, but that the overall impact of the Autocratic and Permissive styles is to destroy the child's self-esteem and self-concept, while the Democratic style fosters these qualities. They also learned that there are tools and strategies that can be used to transform negative parenting habits into more democratic and constructive practices.

Asked about her first experience teaching parenting skills to SGI members, Kathleen stated: "The energy I put into these workshops was received with 10 times the enthusiasm that I expected. Once people learn that there are things they can do to benefit their own lives and the lives of their children, they get so excited! ... People come to the FNCC with a hope for an insight and realization; and their mind set enables that awakening to happen. It was my great benefit to be able to share so much guidance and encouragement with the members here at this conference."

Cynthia Klein, another instructor at the conference, had long cherished a dream of presenting a parenting conference to SGI members. A child psychologist, elementary school teacher and parenting instructor, Cynthia led workshops on enhancing a child's learning abilities, helping children with homework and encouraging family dialogue. "As parents," she explained, "we have a critical role in deciding what our world will be like in the future. By raising our children in a way that enables them to be respectful of others and that encourages dialogue, we can ensure a peaceful and creative future."

Cynthia described the Five Steps of Active Communication in one of her workshops. The first step is listening actively, which means to use posture, tone of voice and words to facilitate listening skills. The second step is listening for feelings. This means to hear the emotions that are being expressed by the child. The third step is to connect feelings to content by restating the child's comments so that the listener correctly understands the child's emotions. The fourth is to look for alternatives and evaluate consequences. In other words, to encourage the child to develop strategies to solve their problem and to help the child understand the consequences of these choices. The fifth and final step is to follow up, or, find out how the problem was resolved. These tools enable parents and friends to support children in handling their problems.

Even morning exercises, led by an enthusiastic Roberta Templeman, Montessori teacher and parenting instructor, was chock full of fun-filled activities for the participants to take back to their local areas.

One lighthearted activity was the Buddhist Find-Your-Partner Game. In this game, half of a Buddhist term is written on two pieces of post-it paper and stuck on the backs of two game players. Each player has to rely on someone else to read the word on his or her back. Then the player has to find the missing half of their Buddhist term on the back of another game player. This game resulted in lots of laughs and a unique lesson in cooperative play and the study of Buddhist concepts.

After each workshop session, participants continued to discuss the ideas that had been presented. Often small groups of members could be seen in the courtyard and in the din-

ing hall talking, encouraging and embracing one another.

It was a most meaningful conference for each of the attendees. They had come seeking answers to the challenging issues facing their families, their schools and their communities. They were refreshed with renewed hope and confidence for the future.

During the final workshop before departing from the FNCC, members shared their conference experiences. Janet Vinograd, who had bemoaned her challenging life at the start of the conference, declared: "I can't wait to go home now! Just bring on the kids. I'm so exciting about using what I've learned here to improve my children's lives and change our family dynamics!" Seattle member, Pat Williams, who has five children, stated: "The condition of our youth in society today is just screaming for help. The well-being of our children is at the center of the new century. My children are my teachers, encouraging me to do my own human revolution first. Here at FNCC, I have learned critically important parenting skills. I realize that, as SGI members, we must lead the way by supporting our youth as they enter the 21st century."

SGI President Ikeda has said, "One of the most essential ingredients in raising children to become fine adults is that parents get firmly in tune with their children and grow together with them, marching forward as one" (March 1993 *Seikyo Times*).

This is the guiding principle of the first Parents and Boys and Girls Coordinators Conference. Participants unanimously agreed that this would not be the last such conference. With determination they pledged to return next year, together with friends and spouses, to continue their training and development as parents and friends of all children, future leaders of a new century of peace.

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