

## **The Family Program: Dharma Practice In Action**

When people think about dharma practice at Spirit Rock, they usually visualize rooms of silent people sitting motionless on zafus or yogis creeping along walking paths at the retreat center. However, most people live a great portion of their lives off the cushion and away from the retreat center. This “off the zafu” practice particularly comes into play when we have children. How to practice then? Jack Kornfield reminds us that it is no less important practice for him to go to the store and buy milk for his daughter than to sit on the cushion. But what does this mean? How do we practice the dharma as we go to the store, cook dinner, wipe runny noses, and ask our teenager to turn the music down again?

The Family Program is very interested in examining what dharma practice looks like after we get up from the cushion. One of the deepest intentions of the program is to provide support, practices, and sangha for families and young people of all ages who are investigating the question of dharma practice in family life. In following this intention, three of the main principles taught in the Family Program are practicing mindfulness (paying attention), kindness, and communicating from the heart.

The key to understanding the Family Program is to view every moment within every class and event as a “wide lens of awareness” mindfulness practice. While many activities within the program can be found elsewhere, and deliberately so to connect young people with their common experiences outside of Spirit Rock, in the Family Program, we frame these moments and experiences within the context of the dharma. See kids playing tag? Look closer, they are sending each other metta. See kids eating snack? Look again, they are practicing patience and gratitude as they say blessings to the interconnected beings that provided the food. Sounds like school with all the bells ringing? Sure we ring them to get everyone’s attention, but “mindful attention” as they listen to the entire sound of the bell ringing as a hearing meditation. One of the roles of the Family Program is to point out children’s natural mindfulness as it occurs, to provide children and parents with a dharmic way to interpret everyday actions, as well as to acknowledge the value of such mindfulness and to cultivate it further. The richness of the Family Program lies in the fact that everything we do in the program is dharma practice and is not separated from our daily life activities.

In a world where kindness is not always the norm, the Family Program is inviting young people to explore the intention to practice kindness and non-harming in all their affairs. We examine how to treat ourselves, other people, and other beings on this planet in a way that will not harm them. This is not an academic study, but a moment to moment experience. It’s the eleven-year-old who sits down with a younger child who he knocked down while playing metta tag too roughly. It’s the eight-year-old who gives up the opportunity to light a candle to another child. It’s the fifteen year old who reminds the group that the singer Jewel says, “in the end, only kindness matters” during a discussion on responses to anger.

On any given Monday Night Children's Dharma Class or Teen event, you will see groups of young people sitting in circles passing a talking stick. This Council practice creates safety and openness for young people to share their feelings and truths from the heart, as well as listen from the heart to the wisdom of other young people. The depth of practice that occurs during these councils cannot be overstated. Time and time again, I have witnessed young people who enter a class exhibiting the whole range of difficult emotions from anger to cynicism pick up the talking stick and say words of such honesty and insight that I am still often brought to the edge of tears. It brings me such joy to think of the precious opportunity and tools provided to young people simply by being given an opportunity to speak and be truly heard. This same Council practice is used the monks at Abhayagiri Monastery in their decision making process.

The really beautiful thing about these practices is that they are every bit as relevant to the fifty-five year old as to the five year old. So for parents and non-parents alike, the practice continues to be asking ourselves the questions such as "Was I kind? Was I present? Was I using right speech?" as we move through our interactions in the world.

I personally experience great excitement seeing these practices in action among such a wide age range. In the Family program, I have the pleasure of teaching children as young as three years through the eighteen-year-olds in the teen program, as well as working with their parents. The incredible core group of Family Program volunteers spans decades in age range as well. I am thrilled to witness the expansion of the Teen sangha as the Teen Meditation Classes and Abhayagiri Weekend Retreat enrollments soared to unheard of numbers last year. In the last year, we have added two Winter Teen Meditation Class Series, and the 2001 fall overnight was the largest ever, with 40 teens attending! The Teen Program even received mention in the 2001 Thanksgiving issue of Time Magazine. The depth of sincerity of practice of these teens brings me great hope for the continuation of the Vipassana tradition into the next generation. The Monday Night Children's Dharma Class is growing also, with five to twelve year olds as well as a group of teen volunteers. The multi-age environment has offered an amazing place to learn from older and younger wisdom alike. In the coming year, Betsy Rose and I intend to focus more on the curriculum of the Family Days. We welcome the ideas and feedback from Spirit Rock members of all ages. Lastly, a thousand thank you's to the amazing Family & Teen Program volunteers, who I believe are modern day bodhisattvas in their own right!

.May we all experience the joy and peace that arises from practicing kindness, mindfulness, and right speech in our daily lives.

Heather Sundberg  
Family & Teen Program Manager

