

How To Support Families
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First, let me say that I'm no expert on creating a joyful family. I learned a lot of lessons the hard way, as my children can tell you. For instance, I used to have a "hard power" approach to parenting. I had certain standards that I wanted my children to meet; I wanted them to do SGI activities and become exemplary in faith, practice and study. Deep down, my desire was for my children to be happy, but they participated in activities with a spirit of obligation. As a result, they developed resentment, which has only slowly dissipated. I learned that it's better to support children in developing their interests naturally rather than to impose standards or obligations on them.

Today, I feel that I have a good relationship with my children. One of my sons has come to understand why I was so adamant that he practice Buddhism — he made that realization on his own, while studying at Soka University in Japan. My daughter and I used to set aside time just for us — each month we'd spend a whole day together or have a special dinner where we could talk. Over time, I think we've created a real bond of trust. My other son is very focused on his career, and I feel that he has a good heart. I'm very proud of them all.

In the interest of strengthening the organization and society, many members have asked: How can the SGI-USA better support families?

I'd like to offer a few points and suggestions on this matter.

The SGI-USA is a pro-family organization, with no discrimination regarding how families are composed. All people are welcome to practice Buddhism and be themselves — whether gay or lesbian, heterosexual, single, in a relationship, married, divorced, widowed, with children or without. I feel that this needs to be explicitly re-stated. The SGI-USA is an open, inclusive organization, and we have no wish to reinforce hurtful judgments or stereotypes that may exist in society.

Primarily, the SGI-USA focuses on the individual. We strive to support each person in achieving his or her dreams based on Buddhism. At the same time, we recognize that each individual is part of a family. We all have or had parents (to whom we owe a debt of gratitude for giving us life), and many of us have siblings, significant others and children of our own. On a broader level, communities and nations can be seen as extensions or reflections of family. On an even broader level, we're all members of the human family. Although we're individuals, we're ultimately interrelated with all people.

Faith is most important in developing a family. One person who practices faith is building a foundation of happiness for his or her entire family. By developing strong conviction in our Buddhist practice, chanting, engaging in dialogue and exerting ourselves to overcome obstacles, each of us is setting an example and offering the light of hope to others. While it "takes a village" to raise a child — and while we all collectively are responsible for society — change begins with us as individuals.

Children grow to be capable and happy when they're surrounded by supportive people. As we all know, young people are our future. But many young people today are struggling with life-threatening and spirit-crushing problems that were perhaps unimaginable a decade ago.

While we know that our children will benefit from practicing Buddhism, it's not advisable to put pressure on them to practice. Instead of asking, "How can I get my kids to chant?" we'd do better to ask, "How can I support them in enjoying Buddhism?" For parents with teens, I recommend reading SGI President Ikeda's "Discussions on Youth" together with your child.

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Also, some members are taking initiative in their local communities to create parenting classes based on Buddhism and to develop activities for children and youth. As we chant about how to support our youth, many wonderful ideas emerge. Whether or not we have children, creating a more family-friendly organization is something that we can all take part in.

Love and commitment make strong families. In an essay on marriage that appeared recently in a Philippine newspaper, President Ikeda shared many insights on love and commitment:

- “Unlike the kind of trust which wavers depending on the situation, true love, in the deepest sense of a bond between two people, is something that develops in the face of rough seas. But this doesn’t mean that one partner has to always give in to the other, or that the happiness of one can be built on the suffering of the other.”

- “In today’s society perhaps a family should be thought of as an airplane. buffeted by winds of change, the [pilots or] co-pilots have the responsibility of assuring safe arrival. The stability of a plane in flight requires clear direction, momentum and constant effort. And a successful flight requires that the co-pilots keep the same destination in sight.”

- “Love takes a thousand different forms.... It is not, in fact, the outward appearance that matters. I always think that when a couple has shared the joys and sorrows of life over a long period of time, a deep tie grows up between them that cannot be severed by outside forces. This is not the kind of open, direct love we might see amongst young couples. It is something broad and deep, a sense of shared destiny.”

As I re-read these points, I feel a renewed enthusiasm for creating a joyful family — in the Zaitso household and throughout the SGI-USA.

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