

## **Bahá'í Education of Children**

By Susan Gammage <sup>1</sup>

Once while considering writing articles on parenting I thought I'd look at the Bahá'í education of children.

### **Who Has The Primary Responsibility for Educating Children?**

Mothers are supposed to make the child's education as their first importance.

Let the mothers consider that whatever concerneth the education of children is of the first importance. Let them put forth every effort in this regard, for when the bough is green and tender it will grow in whatever way ye train it. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 125, #95)

Mothers must provide spiritual training right from the beginning.

Thou didst ask as to the education of children. Those children who, sheltered by the Blessed Tree, have set foot upon the world, those who are cradled in the Faith and are nurtured at the breast of grace—such must from the beginning receive spiritual training directly from their mothers. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280, #627)

Fathers also have the responsibility of educating their children.

Although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development, the father also has the responsibility of educating his children. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 472, #272.6)

Both parents must train their children.

Therefore, the beloved of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful must train their children with life and heart and teach them in the school of virtue and perfection. They must not be lax in this matter; they must not be inefficient. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 398)

Both parents should counsel their children over a long period.

Ye should consider the question of goodly character as of the first importance. It is incumbent upon every father and mother to counsel their children over a long

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period, and guide them unto those things which lead to everlasting honour.  
(Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. p. 134, #108)

Both parents are in a critical position to shape the spiritual development of their children.

Independent of the level of their education, parents are in a critical position to shape the spiritual development of their children. They should not ever underestimate their capacity to mold their children's moral character. For they exercise indispensable influence through the home environment they consciously create by their love of God, their striving to adhere to His laws, their spirit of service to His Cause, their lack of fanaticism, and their freedom from the corrosive effects of backbiting. (The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 157, 2000, paragraph 27)

Responsibility for the spiritual education of children is not the exclusive responsibility of the community.

And now we wish to address a few words to parents, who bear the primary responsibility for the upbringing of their children. We appeal to them to give constant attention to the spiritual education of their children. Some parents appear to think that this is the exclusive responsibility of the community; others believe that in order to preserve the independence of children to investigate truth, the Faith should not be taught to them. Still others feel inadequate to take on such a task. None of this is correct. The beloved Master has said that "it is enjoined upon the father and mother, as a duty, to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son," adding that, "should they neglect this matter, they shall be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord." (The Universal House of Justice, *Riḍván* 157, 2000, paragraph 27)

### **What is a Mother's Responsibility?**

She is chiefly responsible for bringing up a Bahá'í child.

The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá'í writings, is the chief responsibility of the mother, whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such conditions as would be most conducive to both his material and spiritual welfare and advancement. The training which the child first receives through his mother constitutes the strongest foundation for his future development. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 148, 497)

Mothers must establish faith and certitude; the love for and fear of God, and all good qualities and traits within their children.

Therefore is it incumbent upon the mothers to rear their little ones even as a gardener tendeth his young plants. Let them strive by day and by night to establish within their children faith and certitude, the fear of God, the love of the Beloved of

the worlds, and all good qualities and traits. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 125, #95)

Women should be encouraged to attract their husbands and male members of their families to the Faith.

Women should also be encouraged to attract their husbands and male members of their families to the Faith so that the Bahá'í community will be representative of the society of which it forms a part. Gradually the spirit of unity and fellowship, as set forth in our teachings, will be reflected in the life of Bahá'í families. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 616, #2083)

If the mother is a believer, the children are more likely to become believers.

Consider that if the mother is a believer, the children will become believers too, even if the father denieth the Faith; while, if the mother is not a believer, the children are deprived of faith, even if the father be a believer convinced and firm. Such is the usual outcome, except in rare cases. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 287, #637)

### **What is a Father's Responsibility?**

The husband is primarily responsible to support the family.

Similarly, although the primary responsibility for supporting the family financially is placed upon the husband, this does not by any means imply that the place of woman is confined to the home. (Messages from The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, pp. 472-473, #272.6)

But, as mentioned before, fathers also have the responsibility of educating their children.

... although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development, the father also has the responsibility of educating his children. (Messages from The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 472, #272.6)

### **Why Do We Educate Our Own Children?**

Education and training of children are recorded in the Book of God as obligatory and not voluntary, for both the father and mother:

In this New Cycle, education and training are recorded in the Book of God as obligatory and not voluntary. That is, it is enjoined upon the father and mother, as a duty, to strive with all effort to train the daughter and the son, to nurse them from the breast of knowledge and to rear them in the bosom of sciences and arts. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 398)

The connection between mother and child is so strong, that even her thoughts can put a child to sleep.

A mother rocks and rocks her babe to sleep in a cradle, but the thoughts of the child's sleep may so take possession of her mind that sometimes she is able to put him to sleep without the aid of the cradle. This effect is produced by the mother's magnetism. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p. 517, #1753)

To assist them to be safe from every test:

The children must, from their infancy, be raised to be spiritual and godly Bahá'ís. If such be their training, they will remain safe from every test. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 275, #616)

### **When Does Baha'i Education Begin?**

Systematic training begins in the nursery:

These children must be given a good training from their earliest childhood. They must be given a systematic training which will further their development from day to day, in order that they may receive greater insight, so that their spiritual receptivity be broadened. Beginning in childhood they must receive instruction. They cannot be taught through books. Many elementary sciences must be made clear to them in the nursery; they must learn them in play, in amusement. Most ideas must be taught them through speech, not by book learning. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p. 146, #490)

Classes for children under the age of five should be mindful of their shorter attention span.

The House of Justice adds that you should feel free to hold classes for children under the age of five provided you keep in mind that their attention span is relatively short and so the duration of their class periods should be measured accordingly. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 148, #495)

And when the child hath reached the age where he can make distinctions, let him be placed in a Bahá'í school, in which at the beginning the Holy Texts are recited and religious concepts are taught. At this school the child is to study reading and writing as well as some fundamentals of the various branches of knowledge, such as can be learned by children. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280, #627)

Formal education should start at age of five.

From the age of five their formal education must begin. That is, during the daytime they should be looked after in a place where there are teachers, and should learn good conduct. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280, #626)

### **When Should Children Study?**

Every morning, teach them to chant and recite the communes and prayers:

Every day at first light, ye gather the Bahá'í children together and teach them the communes and prayers. This is a most praiseworthy act, and bringeth joy to the children's hearts: that they should, at every morn, turn their faces toward the Kingdom and make mention of the Lord and praise His Name, and in the sweetest of voices, chant and recite. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 139, #115)

He must study every day from morning till noon, so that he may learn how to read and write. From noon till about sunset he should acquire a craft. The children must both learn to read and acquire an art or skill. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 3, #13)

When the children are ready for bed, let the mother read or sing them the Odes of the Blessed Beauty, so that from their earliest years they will be educated by these verses of guidance. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280, #626)

### **Where Are They Taught?**

We should avoid sending Bahá'í children to orthodox religious schools, especially Catholic.

He is sorry to hear your little boy is not developing satisfactorily; very few children are really bad. They do, however, sometimes have complicated personalities and need very wise handling to enable them to grow into normal, moral, happy adults. If you feel convinced your son will really benefit from going to ...,...'s school you could send him there. But in general we should certainly always avoid sending Bahá'í children to orthodox religious schools, especially Catholic, as the children receive the imprint of religious beliefs we as believers know are out-dated and no longer for this age. He will especially pray for the solution of this problem. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 151, #507)

### **What is the Standard for Baha'i Education?**

Bahá'í children should excel.

It is incumbent upon Bahá'í children to surpass other children in the acquisition of sciences and arts, for they have been cradled in the grace of God.

Whatever other children learn in a year, let Bahá'í children learn in a month.  
(Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 141, #119)

### **What Should Children be Taught?**

Let all the lesson be entirely devoted to the acquisitions of human perfections.

The subjects to be taught in children's schools are many, and for lack of time We can touch on only a few: First and most important is training in behavior and good character; the rectification of qualities; arousing the desire to become accomplished and acquire perfections, and to cleave unto the religion of God and stand firm in His Laws: to accord total obedience to every just government, to show forth loyalty and trustworthiness to the ruler of the time, to be well wishers of mankind, to be kind to all. And further, as well as in the ideals of character, instruction in such arts and sciences as are benefit, and in foreign tongues. Also, the repeating of prayers for the well-being of ruler and ruled; and the avoidance of materialistic works that are current among those who see only natural causation, and tales of love, and books that arouse the passions.

To sum up, let all the lesson be entirely devoted to the acquisitions of human perfections. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, p. 148, #494)

From their earliest years, children should be taught to deliver speeches of high quality.

Encourage ye the school children, from their earliest years, to deliver speeches of high quality, so that in their leisure time they will engage in giving cogent and effective talks, expressing themselves with clarity and eloquence. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. pp. 134, #108)

During 'Abdu'l-Bahá's days it was a usual work of the children to learn Tablets by heart.

The Master used to attach much importance to the learning by heart of the Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb. During His days it was a usual work of the children of the household to learn Tablets by heart' now, however, those children are grown up and do not have time for such a thing. But the practice is most useful to implant the ideas and spirit those words contain into the mind of the children. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 150, #504)

Interesting stories from The Dawn-Breakers:

With 'the Dawn-Breakers' in your possession you could also arrange interesting stories about the early days of the Movement which the children would like to hear. There are also stories about the life of Christ, Muhammad and the other Prophets which if told to the children will break down any religious prejudice they may have learned from older people of little understanding. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 150, #504)

They should be educated in several languages at once:

At the start the teacher must place a pen in the child's hand, arrange the children in groups, and instruct each group according to its capacity. When the children have, in a given place, been seated in rows, and each holdeth a pen, and each hath a paper before him, and the teacher hath suspended a blackboard in front of the children, let him write thereon with his chalk and have the children copy what he hath written. For example, let the teacher write an alif (a) and say, "This is an alif." Let the children then copy it and repeat: "This is an alif." And so on, till the end of the alphabet.

As soon as they properly recognize the letters, let the teacher make combinations of the letters, while the children follow his lead, writing the combinations on their paper, until, by this method, they come to recognize all the letters, singly and combined in words. Let the teacher then proceed to writing sentences, while the children copy what he hath written, each on his own sheet of paper. Let the teacher then explain the meaning of the sentence to the children.

And once they have become skilled in the Persian tongue, let the teacher first translate and write out single words and ask the students the meaning of those words. If a pupil hath grasped a little of this, and hath translated the word, let the teacher praise him; if all the students are unable to accomplish this, let the teacher write the foreign language translation beneath the given word. For example, let him write sama (heaven) in Arabic, and ask: "How do we say this in Persian?" If one of the children replieth, "The Persian translation of this word is asiman", let the teacher praise and encourage him. If they are unable to answer, let the teacher himself give the translation and write it down, and let the children copy it. Later, let the teacher ask: "How do they say this in Russian, or French, or Turkish?" If they know the answer, excellent. If not, let the teacher say, "In Russian, or French, the translation is thus and so", write the word on the board, and have the children copy it down. When the children have become skilled in translating single words, let the teacher combine the words into a sentence, write this on the board and ask the children to translate it. If they are unable, let the teacher himself translate the sentence and write down the translation. It would of course be preferable for him to make use of several languages. In this way, over a short period -- that is, three years- -the children will, as a result of writing the words down, become fully proficient in a number of languages, and will be able to translate a passage from one language to another.

Once they have become skilled in these fundamentals, let them go on to learning the elements of the other branches of knowledge, and once they have completed this study, let each one who is able and hath a keen desire for it, enroll in higher institutions of learning and study advanced courses in the sciences and arts. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280-281, #627)

### **How Should Children be Taught?**

Through gentle encouragement:

That is, the mother must continually call God to mind and make mention of Him, and tell of His greatness, and instill the fear of Him in the child, and rear the child gently, in the way of tenderness, and in extreme cleanliness. Thus from the very beginning of life every child will be refreshed by the gentle wafting of the love of God and will tremble with joy at the sweet scent of heavenly guidance. In this lieth the beginning of the process; it is the essential basis of all the rest. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 280, #627)

Children should be taught to read through play.

Here they should be taught, in play, some letters and words and a little reading -- as is done in certain countries where they fashion letters and words out of sweets and give them to the child. For example, they make an 'a' out of candy and say its name is 'a', or make a candy 'b' and call it 'b', and so on with the rest of the alphabet, giving these to the young child. In this way children will soon learn their letters. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, pp. 147, #493)

They should be taught through questions and answers:

One child must question the other concerning these things, and the other child must give the answer. In this way, they will make great progress. For example, mathematical problems must also be taught in the form of questions and answers. One of the children asks a question and the other must give the answer. Later on, the children will of their own accord speak with each other concerning these same subjects. The children who are at the head of the class must receive premiums. They must be encouraged and when any one of them shows good advancement, for the further development they must be praised and encouraged therein. Even so in godlike affairs. Oral questions must be asked and the answers must be given orally. They must discuss with each other in this manner. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Lights of Guidance, pp. 146-147, #490)

### **Are Daughters and Sons Taught the Same?**

A very important element in the attainment of, such equality is Bahá'u'lláh's provision that boys and girls must follow essentially the same curriculum in schools. (Messages from The Universal House of Justice: 1963 to 1986, p. 473, #272.6e)

If it be considered through the eye of reality, the training and culture of daughters is more necessary than that of sons, for these girls will come to the station of motherhood and will mold the lives of the children. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 399)

### **What About Higher Education?**

The child's own preference and inclinations should direct his advanced studies.

Not all, however, will be able to engage in these advanced studies. Therefore, such children must be sent to industrial schools where they can also acquire technical skills, and once the child becomes proficient in such a skill, then let consideration be given to the child's own preference and inclinations. If a child hath a liking for commerce, then let him choose commerce; if industry, then industry; if for higher education, then the advancement of knowledge; if for some other of the responsibilities of humankind, then that. Let him be placed in the field for which he hath an inclination, a desire, and a talent. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 282)

### **What Happens to Parent's Who Don't Meet Their Responsibility?**

Parents will be held responsible.

Should they neglect this matter, they shall be held responsible and worthy of reproach in the presence of the stern Lord. This is a sin unpardonable. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 398)

They could even lose the rights of parenthood.

This responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 472, #272.6)

### **Where Do We Go To Learn More About This Training?**

To our Spiritual Assemblies:

It is incumbent upon the Spiritual Assemblies to provide the mothers with a well-planned programme for the education of children, showing how, from infancy, the child must be watched over and taught. These instructions must be given to every mother to serve her as a guide, so that each will train and nurture her children in accordance with the Teachings. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 138, #113)

What about single Parents?

The single parent may suffer from inadequate material resources, lack of skills and confidence, and the emotional support of a partner in parenting. The Assembly may wish to assist by encouraging access to whatever counseling or support services may be available, by ensuring that transportation to needed services or Bahá'í activities is available, and offering scholarships to Bahá'í conferences, schools and workshops. (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence, p. 130) [https://bahai-library.com/nsa\\_guidelines\\_domestic\\_violence#Support%20for%20Single%20Parents%20with%20Dependent%20Families](https://bahai-library.com/nsa_guidelines_domestic_violence#Support%20for%20Single%20Parents%20with%20Dependent%20Families))

What Would This Training Consist Of?

The House of Justice regards the need to educate and guide women in their primary responsibility as mothers as an excellent opportunity for organizing women's activities. Your efforts should focus on helping them in their function as educators of the rising generation. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 616, #2083)

### **Children's Classes**

In addition to the efforts made at home, the parents should support Bahá'í children's classes.

Of course, in addition to the efforts made at home, the parents should support Bahá'í children's classes provided by the community. It must be borne in mind, too, that children live in a world that informs them of harsh realities through direct experience with the horrors already described or through the unavoidable outpourings of the mass media. Many of them are thereby forced to mature prematurely, and among these are those who look for standards and discipline by which to guide their lives. Against this gloomy backdrop of a decadent society, Bahá'í children should shine as the emblems of a better future. (The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 157, 2000, paragraph. 27)

### **The Role of Children's Class Teachers**

The training and education of children is a great service.

Among the greatest of all services that can possibly be rendered by man to Almighty God is the education and training of children... It is, however, very difficult to undertake this service, even harder to succeed in it. I hope that thou wilt acquit thyself well in this most important of tasks, and successfully carry the day, and become an ensign of God's abounding Grace; that these children, reared one and all in the holy Teachings, will develop natures like unto the sweet airs that blow across the gardens of the All- Glorious, and will waft their fragrance around the world. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. pp. 133-134, #106)

Among the greatest of all great services is the education of children, and promotion of the various sciences, crafts and arts. Praised be God, ye are now exerting strenuous efforts toward this end. The more ye persevere in this most important task, the more will ye witness the confirmations of God, to such a degree that ye yourselves will be astonished. This verily is a matter beyond all doubt, a pledge that shall certainly be redeemed. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 276, #619)

Praise thou God that thou hast succeeded in becoming a teacher of young Bahá'ís, young trees of the Bahá Paradise, and at the same time art able to benefit the other children as well. According to the explicit divine Text, teaching the children is indispensable and obligatory. It followeth that teachers are servants of the Lord God, since they have arisen to perform this task, which is the same as worship. You must therefore offer praise with every breath, for you are educating your spiritual children. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 273-274, #614)

The spiritual father is greater than the physical one, for the latter bestoweth but this world's life, whereas the former endoweth his child with life everlasting. This is why, in the Law of God, teachers are listed among the heirs. Now you in reality have acquired all these spiritual children free and gratis, and that is better than having physical children; for such children are not grateful to their fathers, since they feel that the father serveth them because he must -- and therefore no matter what he doeth for them, they pay it no mind. Spiritual children, however, are always appreciative of their father's loving kindness. This verily is out of the grace of thy Lord, the Beneficent. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, p. 274, #614)

**Teachers of children's classes have every reason to feel pride:**

O thou teacher of the children of the kingdom! Thou hast arisen to perform a service which would justly entitle thee to vaunt thyself over all the teachers on earth. For the teachers of this world make use of human education to develop the powers, whether spiritual or material, of humankind, whilst thou art training these young plants in the gardens of God according to the education of Heaven, and art giving them the lessons of the Kingdom. The result of this kind of teaching will be that it will attract the blessings of God, and make manifest the perfections of man.

Hold thou fast to this kind of teaching, for the fruits of it will be very great. ('Abdul-Bahá, The Compilation of Compilations vol. I, pp. 274-275, #616)