

## India Journal by Minalee Saks

“Tell me and I forget,” the saying begins. It is part of a proverb I quote to help adults understand how children learn.

As a developer of parenting curricula and trainer of parent educators, I had used the entire quote in my work. However, I had never heard it sung, much less with graceful accompanying hand gestures. Suddenly, I was hearing social workers attending a training in Pune, India, combine their voices and actions to add new meaning to the words.

“Show me and I remember,” they continued, singing in accents from India, Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines and Uganda. “Involve me and I understand,” they concluded, and I joined trainees from Ethiopia, Bangalore and Mumbai in cheering the presenters for their effort.



I had been invited to Pune by Holt International Children’s Services to train social workers to use the *Make Parenting A Pleasure*® curriculum. I had helped develop the program through my work for Birth To Three with parents in Eugene and Springfield. I was joined in India by Holt’s program director, Jennifer Goette. We were hosted by a Holt partner program, Bharatiya Samaj Seva Kendra, which is an Indian adoption and social service organization.

When I was asked to do the training, I was both excited and worried. Although I have trained professionals in Oregon, throughout the U.S. and in Ukraine and Romania, I had never led a group from a variety of countries at the same time. Would people from six different countries have common hopes and goals for the families they work with? Would values and assumptions that worked in Lane County and European cultures be appropriate for East Asian countries?

And what about the language barriers? India alone has 300 languages! Would everyone understand my American English, and would I understand them?

After 30 hours of travel, I arrived in Pune. As I got off the plane I was overwhelmed by the smells of exhaust and burning garbage, the blooming bougainvillea; the parrots; the uniformed guards stationed everywhere; and the women’s brilliantly colored saris and salwar kameez, which are long shirts with coordinated leggings and scarves.

After a nap, I went for a walk. Immediately, I was struck by the extreme poverty. I passed people who live on the streets or in the slums. They were begging or selling every item imaginable. The poverty is more overwhelming than what I had seen in Ukraine or

*Above: Minalee Saks leads a group session*

Romania. And then I turned a corner onto a leafy lane. The road was filled with opulent white marble mansions and palaces, some larger than the White House. Each one had extensive grounds, gardens, gates with guards and signs saying, “Beware of dogs.”

The contrast with the poverty was stunning. I wondered, again, how the training’s attendees and I would work together. Our countries are so different. How would we find common ground?

An hour into the training, I could tell that it was going to work. The 19 participants all spoke English and from the very beginning, they were fully engaged in the activities. I began smiling broadly, and I didn’t stop beaming during the entire four days of our time together.



After previewing the content of the entire curriculum, we ended the first day with the suitcase exercise, a guided visualization where parents ‘see’ their children growing from infancy to young adulthood, and then think about all they want them to carry with them as adults; all the values, characteristics, views of the world, ways of being. Then they each pack a ‘suitcase’ for their child with the things that are most important to them. This exercise is

*always* effective as a metaphor for how we talk about parenting....that from the day our children are born, we are packing their suitcases, and that our daily actions and words are the way we pack them.

In our Lane County parent groups and trainings, we refer back to this exercise a lot. Our international trainees responded in exactly the same way as trainees in Oregon, and just as strongly. They said that this exercise would work well with the parents in their programs.

On the second day, I had the group do the exercise, “Through a Child’s Eyes,” where one person stands as the parent, and the other sits in the position of the child. Each takes turns saying they are very angry or expressing other emotions. It was a powerful experience for the group.

All of the trainees agreed that the exercise would be effective with the families in their programs. They told me that the underlying values, approach and content of the

*Above: Trainees prepare for their group’s presentation*

curriculum would be very meaningful for families from their diverse countries and cultures. The trainees were all committed to making cultural adaptations that would work for the parents and children they served.

This training was an enormous learning experience for me. I learned from the trainees about parents in so many different circumstances: different countries, income levels, living situations, or family needs.

When parents are respectfully offered help and support in culturally appropriate ways for the challenging task of raising their children, many will gratefully accept. And the future becomes brighter for everyone.

Upon my return, I learned that Tunisia and Egypt were erupting with citizen-led revolts. Our own country is divided politically, as is our community at times. It was a lot to absorb. Then I thought about the lessons of the training in India, about how people from so many different places share commonalities that aren't always apparent or expected.



And this is what I took away from my experience: Parents are parents throughout the world. Regardless of cultures, allegiances, experiences, living situations or countries – people love their children and want the best for them. Whether living in Creswell, Eugene, Kiev or Addis Ababa, all parents have hopes and dreams for their children.

As one of the trainees wrote about the training, “The best part was that it is universal truth.”

*To listen to the social workers singing the saying that begins, “Tell me and I forget,” visit [http://www.parentingnow.org/training\\_pleasure.html](http://www.parentingnow.org/training_pleasure.html) (click on the link in the upper right corner).*

*Minalee Saks, MS, is the executive director and co-founder of Birth To Three, a Eugene, Oregon not-for-profit whose vision is that every child will be raised by loving, skilled parents.*

*Above: Some of the trainees gather with Minalee*