

[international]

The Isha Home School



The basic purpose of life and the basic purpose of education is to enhance one's boundaries of perception. I don't want the children after ten years of schooling here to just survive. They must blossom and flower wherever they go.

Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev

Wendy Ellyatt reports on her visit to a unique school in Southern India developed by yoga master and visionary, **Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev**

I have just returned from a fascinating holiday in Southern India where I spent a week attending a 'Wholeness' Course at the Isha Foundation in Tamil Nadu, and took advantage of the opportunity to find out about the new 'Isha Homeschool' being developed by the yoga master and visionary Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev.

Sadhguru is a spiritual master with a difference. A highly charismatic,

entertaining and profound teacher, he is currently widely sought after by prestigious global forums to address such diverse issues as human rights, business values, social, environmental and existential issues. He has been a delegate to the United Nations Millennium Peace Summit, a member of the World Council of Religious Leaders, and has addressed panels such as the Australian Leadership Retreat, the Tallberg Forum and the World Economic Forum. Isha courses are now being offered worldwide with the whole organisation run by groups of volunteers, all of whom have themselves experienced the life enhancing benefits of the courses.

In 2005 Sadhguru fulfilled a long-held ambition by opening a school that would allow children to develop according to their own innate nature. Built in the grounds of the Yoga Centre the school

initially started with 72 children between the ages of 5 and 12. All lived on site, together with a close community of teachers – a situation that remains the same today. The aim was to develop something that felt more like staying in a happy family home than an institution. Over the past two years Sadhguru has been evolving his own unique pedagogy and the school is now oversubscribed with children coming not only from India, but also Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, the USA and the UK. It now consists of a vibrant residential community of 147 children and 52 teachers.

The children live in separate houses, each with its own house parents (very similar to the English boarding school system). Most of the teachers are not professionally teacher trained, but are, instead experts in their fields, and there is a constant flow of new people offering



Sadhguru addressing a class of students during the first few weeks of school.



Far left: Senior students working in art class on their favourite personalities.

Left: Children enjoying their evening snacks.

Below: Middle school student working on a Maths problem using paper.



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their services. The primary requirements are: a love of children, commitment, dedication and the demonstration of a passion for learning that can act as a source of inspiration to the children. Few are paid, with almost all living on site as volunteers.

I was shown around by Chocka Swamy who is a member of the administration team. The day starts early! The children get up between 5.15 and 5.45 and start with simple jogging and physical exercises. From 6.45 – 7.20am they have yoga, then have baths, breakfast and assemblies. At 9.20am they start classes. The 5 and 6 year olds stay together, but the 7-10 year olds and 11-15 year olds work within the same space. In most cases they don't use chairs, but instead the children work cross-legged on the floor. I saw a good supply of Montessori materials on display and met a fully trained Montessori teacher who was working with the 7-10 year olds.

Sadhguru is not following any particular methodology however, but is, instead applying his yogic understanding of the science of human development with accurate observations of the children, very reminiscent of Montessori's own

initial scientific approach. There is a clear emphasis on practical life skills as he wants the children to be fully empowered within their day to day environments.

The core subjects studied include: English, Maths, Science, Social Studies, a second language, Environmental Education, Art, Music (including vocal studies and learning how to play an instrument), Dance (or martial arts) and other physical games. The school day ends with games, music and dance activities from 5.30pm, followed by dinner between 6.45 and 8.00pm. The children eat in the same hall as the course participants and meditators. After dinner there are further activities such as student committees, the 'Quiet Learner's Club', documentaries and movie nights, homework and study time. In effect most of the senior students of 10 and above are active until about 9.30pm.

Teachers are seen as inspiring friends and facilitators, rather than authority figures, and are called 'anna' or 'akka' by the children, meaning brother and sister. Chocka told me that teachers were not seen as 'all knowing', but rather as co-learners along with the children. In fact it was clear that the explosive curiosity of

the children frequently produced questions that the teachers could not answer and together children and teachers would then research the answers.

I was in one classroom where this was the case as the children were deeply immersed in studying silk worms, and I overheard the teacher say "I really don't know. I suggest that we ring the university". Sadhguru is really keen on children being active researchers in their own right and is planning to provide a computer in every classroom to ensure that they can access supervised resources from the internet whenever they need. He

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also wants the children to be free to teach and work with each other rather than being reliant upon the adults in the environment. Sadhguru sees adults as a vital part of the learning process, but wants the children to realise their own substantial capabilities.

There are a range of organised and free activities with the overall intention of being able to follow the interests of the individual child. They are currently exploring working with themes, especially those that spontaneously emerge through the interests of the children. The weather in Tamil Nadu has been unusually stormy recently and the children became fascinated in thunderstorms which led to a whole school project that encompassed all subjects.

There is no homework and no tests other than as preparation for the state exams in the 10th grade, with the minimum age of 15. Instead every department has developed its own system of assessment to monitor the ongoing well-being and healthy development of the children. The children are actively given support and feedback through the teachers' comments and suggestions about their work. There is no system of punishment for bad behaviour, but children are taught that every action has a consequence. If they repeat unacceptable behaviour more than



Sadhguru on a trek through the mountains with the Isha Home School children.

three times they are given time-out for reflection, and on the fourth occasion they meet with the Principal to discuss together what the problem might be and find a mutually acceptable solution. A staff student affairs committee meets once a month to discuss particular patterns of behaviour that have been observed. As Chocka says "It is about them learning, rather than us teaching".

I managed to talk to a couple of parents while I was there and the common experience was that the children were increasingly happy and confident and that their thirst for knowledge was inexhaustible! Holidays were therefore much more active for children and parents alike with the children wanting to continue their studies rather than switching off as soon as the term was over. Just as Montessori discovered, such free children do not want to stop learning and, instead of a place of constraint and boredom, school can instead be experienced as a haven of

creativity and discovery.

Sadhguru sees traditional educational systems as highly destructive saying: "True human genius will not flower if this kind of education happens. True human capabilities will not find expression in competition. True human capabilities will find expression only in absolute relaxation". He is tackling the problem with the same focus and determination that Montessori herself exhibited, seeing the solution as a restoration of natural human relativity and intelligence and the current neglect as a "huge disservice to humanity...Human intelligence is the biggest blessing that a human being has...what should have been a blessing has now become a curse" Such a call for change is all too familiar to Montessorians and it is disturbing to think that 100 years after the opening of the first Children's House, with its emphasis on self-determination and self-realization through independent activity, the need still remains so urgent. ■

Wendy Ellyatt is a freelance writer and consultant specializing in holistic education

Resources

The first Isha Institute of Inner Sciences has now opened in America and, following Sadhguru's first visits in 2006, there is now growing interest in the UK. The Foundation offers a unique progression of yoga training under the title 'Inner Engineering' together with a highly impressive range of humanitarian projects.

To read more about the Isha Foundation:

www.ishafoundation.org

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Watch the Home School Intro Video on Youtube -
Part 1 of 2

Watch the Home School Intro Video on Youtube -
Part 2 of 2



Junior girls having fun planting seeds in the children's garden during afternoon class.