



Institute of Sathya Sai Education Australia
National Education Conference 2011

Topic: The Sai Teen Youth Challenge (13-18yrs)
A New Zealand Experience

We'll look at the challenges and benefits in developing a regional teen youth group within our Sathya Sai Organisation in the Auckland region. Having been involved with our Sai Youth Group since the mid 1990's, we have noticed as the years progressed, we were not getting a flow on effect from the SSE through to the youth age. It was the discovery of a black hole that teen youth fell into and never to be seen again.

The question is why is this happening, why do the majority of teenagers lose interest? After researching this phenomenon, by talking to parents, children, teenagers, youths and the SSE teachers, what we found in summary, that the SSE programs did not meet the changing needs of teenagers. It did not make that transition, that critical shift into the teenage world.

The SSE teachers in our region are devoted and dedicated and the kids love them, but ask these same teachers about working with teenagers, and the answers vary from, it's a huge challenge, or we are not able too. Generally speaking, from the ages of 12 years upwards they go through biological and hormonal changes, which can cause confusion and may lead towards being influenced by the environment, peers, and unhealthy activities. Some would say the craziness sets in, so just for a few years of this growth phase, they do go crazy, become rebellious and difficult.

Take for example, little Rahul, a very nice boy, he's a teacher's pet, so kind and polite. The next time we see Rahul, he has earrings, his pants are around his knees, and his new greeting is "*whatz up*". Is he a product of a copy-cat culture, a victim of lost identity, or just for a temporary time, a crazy, rebellious teenager?

In 2002, Vibha went to Thailand to attend the diploma program in EHV, upon returning, got inspired, got organised, got the OK and started a regional teen program in Auckland. She rounded up a dozen teens, aged 14 to 16years, and it grew from there.

Early on, it was important to get the parents on board with this program, and Vibha would talk directly and encourage them to bring their teenagers. Because it's such an awkward age, they are no longer children, but not yet adults; they still need mum and dad to be unpaid taxi drivers, drop off, pick up or car pool. It was important that parents could feel that they could talk to us, give feedback, support and ideas for the program.

Working with teens, you learn really quickly that at this age they need mentors and role models, and our program is about walking with them through these crazy years. As a facilitator, as a mentor, we need to know the Terrain of the teenager, we have to understand them, adjust and be able to navigate through their world.

The next question is, “*Who makes an ideal teen youth facilitator?*” They need to have lots of energy and enthusiasm and relate well to teenagers, they must have the 3 C’s, which is commitment, care and consistency. The most important ingredient is to be a good role model. Being a husband and wife team has worked very well for us, as it gives a good balance. For example, outside the program, the girls do talk to Vibha about girls stuff, and I talk with the boys about sports and the latest games. Really it’s about building a rapport with them. We also bring in hand picked, senior youths, aged 22 to 35 years to run various programs.

Swami once explained to us, that there are different types of knowledge in the world. He gave the example of bookish knowledge, superficial knowledge, general knowledge, but he said the best type is practical knowledge. On two different occasions, he talked the importance of self confidence, he said “confidence in the self”, he emphasised its importance saying that it is “very deep”.

Reading further into Swami’s teachings, we can take this on different levels of understanding, from the atomic to the individual. With Swami’s guidance and in the context of the teen youth program, our broad objective is to bring out the development of self confidence, self esteem, and to encourage teenagers to lead a holistic, fun filled, value based life style.

Because, at this age, they need the ability to stand up and say **No**; no to smoking, drinking, drugs, or what ever is bad and immoral....

They need the ability to say **Yes**, and do what is good, and helpful to society. This is self confidence, and, in fact, is practical spirituality.

In Auckland ,we are fortunate to use the premises of The Sai House, which is literally a big house, with another large outside room dedicated to the organisation for activities. It has a library and book sales area, prayer room, and different rooms for meetings and activities.

It is here we hold the teen youth program on Sunday afternoons for 1½ hours. During the year, we will look at topics like:

- good study techniques
- preparing for exams
- concentration exercises
(that help with studies, or preparing for a sporting game, or music performance)
- time management
- public speaking

- inspirational people
- peer pressure
- Swami's discourses

During the program we use, ice breakers, skits, drama, music, quiz, small group work. We also source materials from the internet, magazines, DVD's and libraries.

We hold weekend camps and day trips, sports afternoons and special events.

It is about helping teens bring out those practical life skills which enables them to face their immediate and future life challenges.

We have seen first hand the positive benefits that a teen youth program can bring, the bonds of friendship the teens create, the leaps in their personal development, leadership roles at school, the love they have for Swami and our organisation.

Om Sai Ram
Michael & Vibha Leathart
Auckland, New Zealand