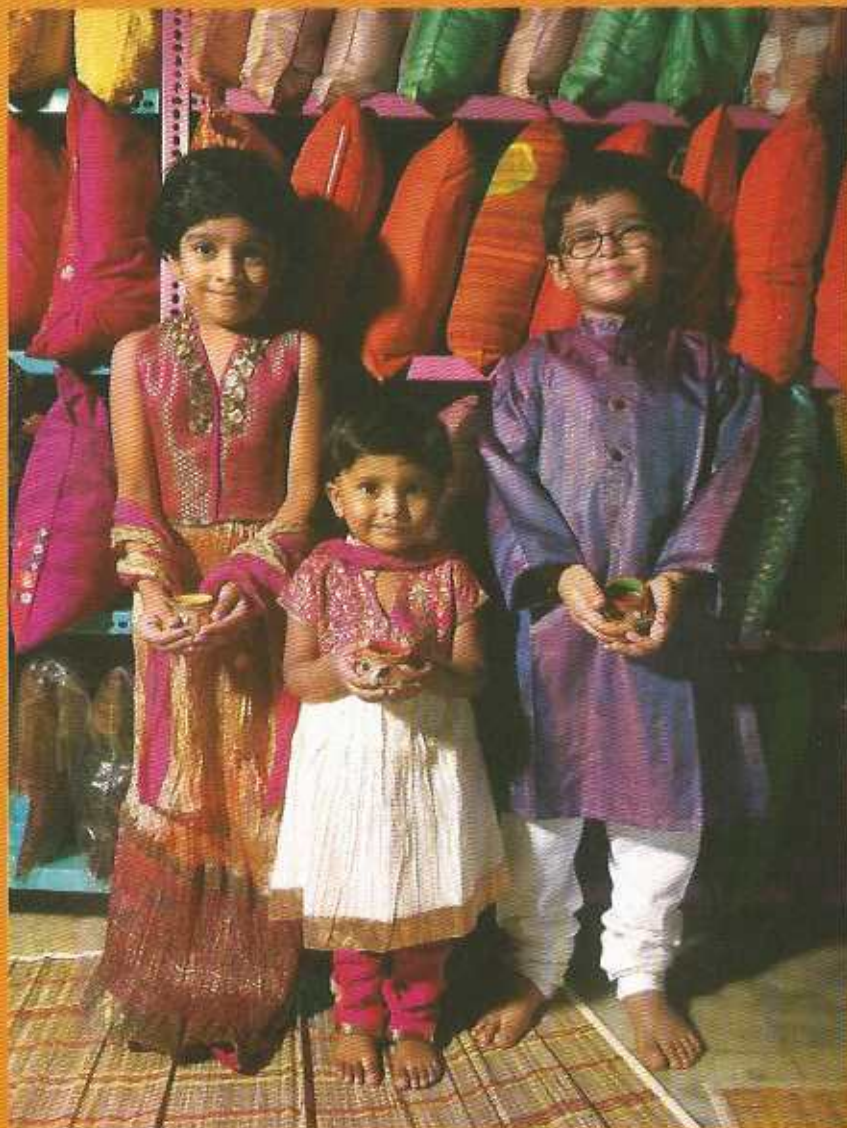


THINK!

# God is in the details!



50 Parent and Child

During this festive season, it's natural to try and introduce your tot to religious rituals and the concept of God. Here's the lowdown on how, why and whether you should...

Words Ramya Srinivasan

**K**ahlil Gibran famously wrote about children in *The Prophet*, 'You may give them your love but not your thoughts, for they have their own thoughts'. Few parents would concur as most of us try our best to pass along our own thoughts, beliefs and bundles of rituals to our little ones. Even parents with a modernistic approach about providing the appropriate environment and letting children decide on their own seem to gain a sense of pride when their kids make choices in line with their stream of thinking. When it comes to religious beliefs and customs, the urge is stronger and the process begins early on.

Irrespective of whether you're a believer or an atheist or an agnostic, you have to admit that there is a part of you that aims to pass on your traditions to the next generation, just like how you picked them up from your parents. Whether it's touching the feet of elders seeking their blessings, lighting diyas at home or fasting during the month of Ramadan, the customs and traditions have been handed down over generations. Festivals are a time when the traditions come to highlight, probably, more than at any other time of the year. "I am nothing if

not for the customs I follow. Back when I was a child, I remember every festival celebrated with grandeur at home. There used to be a sense of excitement and the whole family would huddle up for the day. I want to practice the same sort of ritual, so my child is able to learn and appreciate a bit about our culture," says Deepa Kannan from Coimbatore, mum to two. "When my husband and I were kids, Diwali was the 'big' festival with crackers being burst and sweets being shared and a whole lot of bonhomie experienced with neighbours and relatives. But now, with the consciousness on environment, we

have simmered down on celebrating Diwali and the focus has shifted to Navratri. We have the tradition of having golas, where we arrange idols of Gods in steps. My two girls love dressing up and socialising with the neighbour community over evening snacks during this time. There is a lot of singing too!" gushes Deepa, explaining their annual Navratri ritual.

But given the demands of the new age, with many families having both parents working, is the enthusiasm dying down? Is it





begun to talk. It's hilarious to watch them initially, but surprisingly after a few months, you see them picking up the verses."

But, are children always compliant and ready to pick up the stuff that we want to pass on to them? "Oh! My seven year old has no interest in reciting prayers. When it comes to festivals, he loves the food and socialising, but you get to the serious part and he is visibly bored. The one thing we have agreed on as a couple is not to force him into it. We hope years of subtle influences will work, but if it does not, we have decided to take it in our stride," shares a persistent mother. Raji says, "My daughter bombards us with an array of questions... Is there a God? Is that a He or a She? Are there many of them? If God lives in the sky, can we meet Him if we travel by a plane? Phew! The questions do not end. Well, there is no easy way, but my favourite way of teaching them anything new is making up stories or reading books... I feel the message reaches



getting impractical to continue with traditions? Raji, who is a working mum, opines, "It's all about planning ahead and blocking the dates beforehand. It gives us a great opportunity to bond together doing the little things and it's something we are passionate about as a family. There are exceptions however, when workload plays a spoilsport to your plans, but those situations are not too many." Celebrating festivals with pomp is one approach, but Veena Jacob, mum to three-year old Joanne, believes that everyday rituals play a key role in imbibing certain values. "We do the Sunday church routine every week. As a family, we also pray together every night before dinner. Sometimes, we recite prayers and sometimes we read verses from the Bible and sometimes we use our own words to offer thanks to God for all the blessings. Interestingly, they have turned out to be a great sharing experience for the family." Raji, who sends her daughter, to shloka recitation classes, believes that an early start helps. "Yes, it does, because the habit gets ingrained then! However, I have seen children coming for the classes at an age, when they have hardly

better that way without taking on a preachy tone."

For some kids though, God is in the Ganesha and Krishna cartoons. Some parents shared a few quirky and interesting questions they get like "Why does Ganesha have an elephant head?", "When you say, God is strong, do you mean like the Avengers?", "Is He hiding from everyone like Spiderman and that's why we cannot see him?", "Does Shiva get angry like the Hulk?"... Surely, the influence of super heroes seems to be prevalent everywhere! Answering these questions is not a cakewalk and most parents appear to figure it out along the way. "I don't think anyone sat down and explained these things to us when we were little, we just figured out as we grew up and held on to whatever belief made sense to us. I am a believer, whereas my wife is agnostic. So, we try to promote a healthy climate at home where there is enough space and freedom for discussions. I believe that's most important when couples have conflicts in their beliefs. I think it's important the child knows that it's okay to have either of the two beliefs or even a fresh one. We only want his beliefs to make him a better person," says Prathap Narasimhan from Bengaluru, dad to a six year old.

When couples from different faiths get married, the situation could get more complicated. One mother shares, "Initially, I guess we both got a little competitive, but then slowly we got the hang of how to work it out. We took 'the more, the merrier' approach and we celebrate festivals and rituals from both faiths. Now we have worked out our own mix-and-match potion." Even the skeptics agree that there is an allure to all the hoopla about practicing rituals.

In joint families, the grandparents take the lead, but nuclear families rely on friends and neighbours. "We live in a gated apartment community where every festival is celebrated in a huge manner and that really adds to the appeal. There are food stalls everywhere with sweets, savouries and other delicacies; there is plenty of fraternising that goes on. We just enjoy the whole atmosphere then," says Rupa Suresh from Sharjah, mum to a 10 year old.

There seems to be no doubt that religious traditions still play an enormous role in people's lives. Busy lives, conflicting beliefs, reluctant children – nothing appears to get in the way of exuberant parents who want to play role-models and get their children to emulate them. Well, it certainly seems to add up to the charm of being a parent! P&C

