

Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Episode 2 with Devinder Singh

Devinder Singh

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Susie Perkins: Welcome to the Meerilinga Podcast series, “Positive Childhoods”. This podcast is produced to celebrate Children Week 2021 and the podcast production is funded and kindly sponsored by the West Australian Department of Education and Lotterywest.

Belynda Smith: Kaya this podcast is recorded on the land of the Wadjuk Noongar people. We respectfully acknowledge their continuing connection to land, waters, and community and would like to pay our respects to First Nations people, past and present, in the spirit of reconciliation.

Thank you so much to those educators and parents listening in. We really appreciate everything it took for you to be here listening in today. My name is Belynda Smith. I'm a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga Parenting Service, and I'm really passionate about meeting the needs of parents so that we can help families thrive.

Susie Perkins: And I'm Susie Perkins, I'm the Advisor for Parenting and Cultural Engagement with Meerilinga and feel the same passion as Belynda about supporting parents and educators to help our children thrive.

Belynda Smith: Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation. We're a registered charity, and we promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: working with children, their families, early education professionals, planners in the community to raise the status of children in Western Australia.

So, we're really excited today and really pleased to have a wonderful guest, Devinder Singh! Devinder, thank you for being here, welcome.

Devinder Singh: Thanks, thanks for having me.

Belynda Smith: I'll do a very brief little outline of the little things I know about you. I've met Devinder's beautiful little girl, so he is the dad of a 3-year-old daughter and has been living in Australia for 11 years.

Speaks four different languages, which completely amazed me, and is working in the not-for-profit sector as a Strategic Advisor around disability services.

So, we are really honoured and privileged to have you here, thank you.

Devinder Singh: Thank you, thanks for having me. The fourth language is English.

Belynda Smith: Which, yeah, it's just amazing today.

Devinder Singh: Yeah, and don't mind my mistakes. You know, I'll make up and down mistakes. For the listeners, and the parents, and the educators: languages, you know, when we talk about languages, parents are pushing kids to learn multiple languages. I was fortunate enough to be a boy in a country where they taught me the language of the state I was born in, and I was talking the language of the nation I was born in, so I had two languages just taught beyond English as a default in the school. Which helps me learn and, with memory and everything.

It's a very good development tool, learning more languages. So, power to you, parents.

Belynda Smith: Now we're curious to start to just ask you what brings you to this moment. What's been the pathway of your life to bring you to working in that disability sector and what's brought you to be an advocate for people with disabilities and also for families?

Devinder Singh: I'll start from the start. People can't see me because it's an audio podcast, I come from India. I was born in India, and we were raised as intellectuals. We were never raised as people who would have empathy in the[ir] language.

It is more you have to go for the best commercial roles: you have to be a CEO, or you have to be a bureaucrat, or good positions. Raised as an intellectual, I did my engineering, did my MBA (so I did a postgraduate degree) and at the age of 24 getting my first job. [I] worked in the corporate and again the language was non-empathetic. The language was *for profit*. It was all politics in play, and you have to learn basic skill sets of working and a bit of politics.

That was the plan. As I moved to Australia and I got the opportunity to work in not-for-profits, I saw a transition. I was doing the same work, [but] in the not-for-profit space, with the skill set which I had, which were commercial skills and most strategic advisory.

I realised there was a transition of the language in me and the mindset from being non-empathetic, "It's only money", to being, "Yes, the money will flow in, but you have to value humans and people". When we watched and volunteered in disability space, I saw that the impact all the strategies, all commercial analysis which I would you know give my feedback to the chief executives of the businesses, would turn into real decision making, and would impact lives.

So hence the language has transitioned from being, working with all for-profits to NFPs, so it's the last seven years and when you become a parent you have more subtle changes in your language and understanding of things which are beyond you.

So that's where I'm now at. I want to spend next 20 years of my life to have a commercial social impact. To be in this space, to provide social impact like you know, social housing projects, like doing work in the disability and age care space – because we want to provide opportunities for people with disabilities and elderly people so that they can live a better life.

Belynda Smith: I can hear when you're talking, I can kind of sense how this could trickle down and really, really impact children. If you're providing services for these grownups, and if you're focusing on this social change, what's your perspective on how that will kind of work to support children?

Devinder Singh: Yeah. Just to give from my own example, I think children of this era don't see colour.

The first thing which was very in my face was the colour of my skin when I landed [in Australia]. And it still is today. There are no issues and challenges [as] I can face all of it, but what I see [is] the difference in the young people now and children of this world, they don't see colour.

That's very powerful.

And when I was talking about languages earlier – sorry, I'm digressing a bit – but when I went to get my daughter's name in one of the big private schools in both and I asked them, "Do you teach other languages?"

"Yes, we teach Spanish. We teach Italian. We teach this/that."

"So, do you teach Noongar?"

"No."

I said you are a tier 1 private school in Perth, and you are said to be as the best in all of Australia, but you don't teach the language of the land. That was a moment which I [said] that I will teach my kid, or push my kid, to learn the language of the land. And there are more traditional cultural centres that would teach languages and other dance forms from my own culture as well. There [are] other things which will be done beyond the formal education system.

Susie Perkins: You said before, when we were talking before we started, that your daughter goes to childcare, and is with a family day care educator. Can you talk to us about why you made that decision and a bit about the educator, because I think that's important?

Devinder Singh: Traditionally and culturally for us, in cultural traditions of you know my family, kids are very important. Kids are assumed as – you know you have capital investments? You invest money and so it's like interest.

People are more concerned, and grandparents are more as well, they value grandkids there versus their own child. So, it's like interest is more valued to the principle. That's typical in the language we use as in vernacular.

The reason why we went to a Family Day care and the person who's the educator, she's culturally and linguistically diverse. She can speak the language ISP, as in my home language. So, she can talk to my child in that language, and she understands subtle differences.

For example, in a normal formal day care, they won't force feed kids, they will keep food on the table [and] they can feed themselves. But you know our children are more pampered culturally; they are very of high importance and they just, you know, eat, eat, eat! Six meals a day.

And she does that. She understands that difference between [culture]. There's an acceptance, so she [Devinder's daughter] gets more love; it's like a mother, that's what I feel that family does here. And it's a smaller setting for children, so that's very powerful for me to connect my child with culture and that motherly affection.

Susie Perkins: Yeah, and that understanding of culture and what's significant and important, for your family, and for your child, yeah.

Devinder Singh: And at the bottom line, you know Australian culture and my culture, they are similar. All cultures are very similar. There's not too [many] differences, you know you respect your elders, you respect your family, you respect people, your neighbours, and everybody else.

The basics [are] very similar, it is just how we present the respect in different fashion. It's important for me that my child understands both sides of the coin.

Belynda Smith: Beautiful.

Susie Perkins: Yeah, fascinating.

Belynda Smith: And- yes, what were you going to say?

Devinder Singh: You know parenting is very important because that's where you can, you know, create a villain or a hero – not to use masculine words, but – just essentially, you can create a villain or a hero at the same time and how you can train-

I go shopping for my daughter. I don't go only on pink, only on blue, so I go both aisles. So, she has clothes from boys and girls both sides. She has dresses also, she has shorts also, so she has both the sides, I'm not questioning.

As she was young, culturally one of the things which happens here the majority of the people who are from India [will] do the piercings in the ears when the kid is very young. I stopped that. I told my you know the family around that we will not do it.

She will have a choice when she turns 12 and then she can make the choice. And also, then the other part of parenting is I want her to have [the] choice to make decisions on her own rather than me forcing that you not to have piercing.

I don't want to raise my daughter to be a girl who is "pretty". I don't use verbs or adjectives like, "You are pretty, you are cute." Why can't I raise my daughter as intellectual or as somebody who can think on their own? So, I will not use words like beautiful.

One day I was shopping for shoes and the sales lady I was saying, "You buy these Unicorn shoes!" Pink, and they were good sparkly pink. No issues with pink and unicorns.

But I don't want to enforce a subtle subconscious to my [daughter] that you have to look pretty. So, as she grows for next 10 to 12 years to feel as a default "I have to look pretty and beautiful. Everybody compliments on my beauty."

She will have to look beauty for everybody else. Then Instagram and Tik Tok happens, then anxiety and stress happens. I want to take that off the equation.

No "I have to look pretty or beautiful"

Belynda Smith: And like most parents, you know in my work I have the great privilege of hearing parents talk really honestly about their experiences and all the thought and care they put in and I can hear that with you too. So much thought into what's best for her and the kind of life that you want for her. And dealing with those huge, big oppressions like sexism and like racism, and I guess that's sort of leading meandering to my next thought: You mentioned that you're finding that children that young age are really colourblind, is the way you put it. What sort of future do you hope for her in terms of versus your experiences around racism?

How do you hope that things are as she's growing into a young woman?

Devinder Singh: And I see racism is a function of people who are decision-makers in this world today. To be very literal on that, in the next 20 years, they won't be the decision makers, they will pass on.

They will move on and the baton and will be given to the young ones. As more younger people come into the decision-making positions or most of the population. It's a matter of time.

I'm not doing anything to remove racism, but it'll go off with time as people who had that subconscious, or conscious, languages and tonalities and legislation and legal and all of that stuff, that will go off with time.

I see the future for my daughter to be very- I think she will have opportunities. I don't think she'll be facing any form of racism or sexism. But if there is, I will be there to [teach] her how to respond to racism, because I've seen all of it.

When my sister, she came five years ago to this country, and I was training her initially in how to respond to criticism. Always telling her, "Use this language, use these words." Any migrant who comes into this country and they have that racism being done to them, subtle or in the face, I give them my toolkits, how to respond and react.

Belynda Smith: Wow, I think that's such a huge thing to carry on your shoulders, to have to think about. I mean, I know as a woman I have my toolkit of how to respond to sexism, but yeah, that's a huge thing to carry to have to have in your mind that at any given moment I might have to pull out this toolkit to respond in a certain way – that must be kind of exhausting.

Devinder Singh: I think when you- when it's new it is exhausting. [But] when you have seen that enough and you become used to it. But having said that, it should not happen. Nobody should be going through that.

I'll give an example. I was working with one of the not-for-profits in the disability space and we were working together to code design and problem solve as a larger group. That group had people from different levels. So, a group from you know Anglo-Saxon, people from African communities, people from Indian communities. So different, so good mix off in a very diverse group.

And there was a moment, there was a break. People went off, to take tea and this African lady had a more traditional name and it was difficult to pronounce.

I don't want to refer the names but this person of Australian background and with another Australian background person were talking to each other, one to one, and I was sitting on my phone and everybody else was out. This African-origin lady was not in the room and then they were talking to themselves, the people from Australian background.

She said, "Why can't people have simple names like Margaret and [random syllables]?"

And then I said, "Seriously?". That's where it starts. That's where it starts. That was the first thought: Why can't people be like me? Why people can't have simple names? Why people can't use my language? That's where it started. That's the first thought.

So, she was pushed back when I picked that board up and I started talking to her [about] that. Not sternly, not aggressive, just giving her, "that's where it started". You know, that's the initial, that's the first thing people think about.

And she was taken aback. "I was not talking about that, I was not being, racist of any form."

I said, "no, no, that's where it starts. You should be aware of that and never transfer that."

What happened to that person who they're talking about? I don't want to make it big, but I want to tell people that this is not right and that was taken care of.

So, this is one of the examples where it is not impacting me, but it's impacting to somebody who's migrant.

Susie Perkins: Yeah, I think you as someone that has worked with young children for many years over my working life, I'm always incredibly grateful about the lessons that as adults we can learn from our children. As you say, children don't see colour, they accept people as they find them, essentially. It's only as they start to move into the adults that are concepts of life that they start to learn about sexism and racism and-

Devinder Singh: All the isms.

Susie Perkins: All the isms, exactly.

Devinder Singh: Can I ask you a question, you both a question?

Have you observed, when young kids who moved to this country at the age of 6 or 7, how do they cope in terms of, change of culture, change of language, change of space because I have not come into this country as a kid?

What have you seen? What's the experience?

Susie Perkins: I guess what I've observed is that it's the family unit, the family structure is incredibly important in supporting children to be able to settle into a culture that may have lots of similarities, but also will have lots of differences. Often language is probably one of the most significant. But I know you know, working in the parenting space, understanding the differences, the cultural differences, around parenting and supporting children's behaviour: all of those things can be very, very different. Adults struggle with that, but children struggle with that sometimes as well.

Devinder Singh: Is there any kind of support schools provide with young children coming from different backgrounds, to feel normal or to be normalised and, there are?

Susie Perkins: There are agencies, like multicultural futures, and in terms of policy, state and WA, there's the office of multicultural interests at work with service providers to ensure that their staff are offering a good service to families that have immigrated to Australia or, refugees into this country.

So, there are support services around, but it- I mean, it falls on all of us to be supporting one another and educating and informing and calling out the isms.

Like you were just saying, calling out the isms when we see them. Not necessarily, not in a harsh way, but in a supportive and kind way, I guess.

Devinder Singh: And you know, horses for the courses. When somebody is bit harsher you can be harsh.

(All laugh)

Susie Perkins: Yeah, that's true.

Devinder Singh: But Gandhi said that if somebody slaps on your left cheek, do the right one So, that's not the right way, essentially, to manage all the conflict. You have to see what's the intensity on the other.

Can I give a counter view on culture, as not all culture is good? Whatever being taught in the culture [might not be] good, I'll give an example.

So, there is something called, there's an annual festival called Lohri which happens on 14th of January every year. When kids are born, when you have young babies born into the family, when it's a boy child, they celebrate a larger event on the same day.

But it's a girl child, they won't. That's bad about the culture, so I'm calling that out. I pushed my immediate family and beyond that I have a girl, but I will celebrate the same event for the girl child. I will be the one, or we will be the one, who will change from here onwards.

I would raise my daughter, not as a boy, but as a child.

Belynda Smith: I think you're so right that parenting is such a cultural construct. There's a similarity that everybody is wanting the best for their children – every parent I've ever worked with adores their child and wants the best for them.

So, we're all starting from that same space. I think it's really interesting that you're thinking so clearly about what you want to take with you, and then what you want to leave behind. And it's a great way to go, isn't it? To really think about that.

On that note sort of thing, you have two sides of the coin. One of the questions I wanted to ask you is just on a personal note, what it would have been your great joys about being a father and what have been the big challenges.

Devinder Singh: So, I think the biggest joy is when I pick my daughter up from the day care and she runs calling you 'Daddy' and then hugs you.

Another big joy is when – I don't, when I was reading books on parenting from the west, co-sleeping is not that much accepted. I want to have co-sleeping habits with my daughter at whatever age she doesn't feel like sleeping.

You know doing co-sleeping that warmth from your child. And yes, your child will push you away, also, you have that. But that warmth is very powerful, that warmth is to kill for, or die for (not to kill for, sorry!) but to die for. And that's the biggest joy.

The challenge is when I say "[Daughter's name]" and then she will turn around say, "What?!?" So that's another challenge, the tonality and the multiple meanings of the tonality is a challenge.

Belynda Smith: Yes, yes, we all struggle with those moments as parents, I think. Again, depending on our own messages we got as children around, whether it was OK to speak like that or what it meant if we spoke. Yeah, it's interesting.

Thinking around the disability space, I have listened to some really interesting podcasts where families of children with disabilities are sharing their experiences. So, I'm just curious about your perspective on the kinds of challenges that families who have a family member with a disability, or specifically a child might have, and how service providers how other members of the community can make life go better for families who are experiencing those challenges.

Devinder Singh: Princess Margaret hospital. That's where the kids, young children, get diagnosed in the first instance. When young parents receive the first news that there's some issues with the child, that's the biggest painful moment they go through. The first painful moment is acceptance that there is something wrong and parents will push themselves. That's a difficult thing initially when they realise that child has some challenges or learning abilities or disabilities, whatever they might call it.

So, the first piece of the puzzle is the acceptance which takes some time. And nowadays parents are more well read, hence more young children are coming through scheme, NDIS, which is National Disability Insurance Scheme through intellectual disabilities and [autism]. When kids are, our children are, supported through therapy very early, it's called early childhood early intervention scheme.

So, when somebody have early intervention through therapies, the whole of life is much better. If you don't intervene early, you leave it until the you know, adulthood, things can be worse. I think parents are more well read, but the challenge from disabilities also is from the regional remote country towns when there are not all therapists available.

Metro will have all the therapists. Whether it's OT, Speechy, you name it. But whereas you know if you go to remote country towns you will not find them. So, not all children have the equal opportunities to receive services. That's one biggest challenge.

The basic principles of disabilities for young children are choice and control. And as parents they should have the choice of service providers and there are not many service providers in the regional towns.

That's the gap. How can we provide equal opportunities to all children? That's the biggest question, mark.

Nobody has solved that problem. The problem has been persistent for long and it's the same as in health care.

I was talking to a family with young kids in in one of the remote country towns and she said I was told by one of the service providers that, "It's your choice, you're living in the country so..."

That's painful to hear, and as a parent it's very difficult when you are fighting all those battles. Yeah, and single parents having all of that going for them, and then financial challenges, and then your child has some issues, and they have to go from you know pillar to post to find services and then staying with the right service provider is also difficult.

You can find a therapist, but will your child be adaptable in in that situation? Not all therapists are equally good and nowadays most of therapists will have long waiting time. To get the first diagnosis there could be six to nine months wait period.

So, what happens for that time? Who's responsible for worsening of behaviours for that nine month? Because that nine months in the younger years has will come will have a cumulative and larger impact in their adulthood.

Susie Perkins: Yes, exactly.

Devinder Singh: So again, yes, the situation is painful, but India, what it had done is it has given access to more people with options. I think it's a learning curve and it's a work in progress. The world is looking at Australia from a disability point of view because we are the first in the across the world to keep providing that centralised, or human-centred, services. If we nail it right, it'll be your model to be copied.

Susie Perkins: Around the world. Fantastic.

Belynda Smith: Yeah, wonderful. So, we're also curious just about your experience of children's friendships. We've got this little focus for this podcast around children's friendships and relationships, and you've talked a lot about those broader relationships with culture and with family.

And now I'm interested about your perspective on maybe your experience with [daughter] around, how do you support children to have good friendships?

Devinder Singh: I think providing multiple communal options, like you know when you are part of different community groups.

For example, you know when my daughter goes to learn- will go to learn Noongar, she will have people from different backgrounds. And for example, she will go to learn ballet classes, so we'll have different communal backgrounds coming in together.

I think those are the opportunities as parents we can provide and not to stop with our own subconscious biases that we don't want to interact a lower or higher socioeconomic class and all of that. People come with those packages and those preconceived notions, but if you can stop all of that subconscious in your own head and not transition that to your own child because you want to provide all the opportunities of learning.

What I have learned from my own [experience], until the age of 24, I was highly intellectual. I would not talk to anybody who's below my intellect. I would say if you are lower qualified I will not talk to you. But with time as I've interacted with more people from diverse of backgrounds, I've come to a conclusion that all humans are equal and you have to value the human first, then the degrees.

At the age of 24 I was something else. But today I'm very different. I've changed and transitioned by interacting, not by thinking what I think, or I would have thought. I could have been, you know, a loner. And hence I had less friends, or no friends, you might call it

So, I think different Community access is very important, very important for friendships and different friendships will teach you different things

Belynda Smith: I'm really hearing this lovely thread of diversity throughout everything you've said and that fits in really beautifully with having those diverse spaces for her to connect with other people and also that thread of connection that human connection

Devinder Singh: Can I also talk about few things which are not on the lighter side. Yes, it's all good, and light, and happy days, but I want to acknowledge from a disabilities point of view. Young children, when royal commission happened into institutions [regarding] all the young children who were abused, kids with children with disabilities had the higher propensity towards abuse picker. Specifically intellectual and autism-based disabilities because they're nonverbal and expressive, so they are more prone to abuse.

And I want to shout out to the current commission happening in disabilities and the brief is to identify and neglect abuse in all forms of institutions for people living with disabilities, and they're covering all age groups.

I think that will be in the face of this country and to understand and accept that you cannot accept abuse at any level.

If a person has disabilities doesn't mean that it should be more abuse [compared to] some, there should be no abuse as a default.

I think I think we should acknowledge that. I would want to acknowledge that; we need to be aware of that part of the society or the community.

Belynda Smith: I have a friend with a little boy who is nonverbal and autistic, and I know that's a huge stress for her: understanding those statistics and knowing that he is at risk in that way.

I guess a shout out to all the parents and educators who are working so hard to keep our children safe and care so much. It's great if our policies are really working hard to implement all sorts of protective structures because we really need to be protecting everyone, but particularly our children.

Is there anything else that you wanted to add before we do our quick questions to finish up? Anything you want to let everyone know before we go into that?

Devinder Singh: I think my message to I would want to give for all the parents who are listening and educators; they should be more sensitive on subtle changes, not just in the body language, but in few things so that they can identify.

I'm happy with people kid's all getting equal opportunities. That's good, but abuse should never happen. So, they should very be very mindful of subtle changes in the environment you are sending your child in. I would be more in pain to see any child being abused in any way.

Susie Perkins: Yeah, thanks Dev.

Devinder Singh: Thank you.

Belynda Smith: So, for each of the podcast produced in this series, we do a little 'quick questions' to round it out. So, some questions for you, are you ready?

Devinder Singh: Yes

Belynda Smith: Name the book you loved most as a child.

Devinder Singh: Oh, dear Lord, we had storybooks. I think, Black Beauty

Belynda Smith: Oh lovely. Who is the first friend you can remember having as a child and what did you love about them?

Devinder Singh: Ah, we used to study together, used to do maths together. He was my neighbour, and we were in the same school, so that's what I loved. And once a year we were studying maths together. We did the whole book back to front before the examination and we nailed it, 97%.

Belynda Smith: Beautiful!

Devinder Singh: That's what I loved!

(All laugh)

Belynda Smith: What's your happiest childhood memory?

Devinder Singh: Oh, dear Lord.

Belynda Smith: I know good questions, aren't they?

Devinder Singh: My first bike. The red one. We went to this bike shop, and I was jumping on one bike then another one, but I picked up the red one and funnily all my bikes and all my cars and everything was red from there onwards.

Belynda Smith: Red ones go faster, absolutely.

Susie Perkins: Describe your favourite outdoor base or place, Dev.

Devinder Singh: It's a bit risky. When I was a child, we used to fly kites on the terrace without anything to stop us to falling off the terrace. My grandmother's house in the village had a big terrace so we used to fly kites. That was the play area for us to fly kites in the evening... without parents supervising us.

(All laugh)

Susie Perkins: Complete this sentence: To help them thrive, Children need:

Devinder Singh: Love.

Belynda Smith: Yep.

Susie Perkins: Beautiful.

Finally, how can listeners learn more about your work and get in touch with you and your organisation?

Devinder Singh: People can find me on different podcast platforms. If they search for Dev Singh, they might find me. I have a podcast called *The Disability Spectrum* Podcast, search for that. There's another podcast which I'm doing. It's called *The Social Sector Merry Go Round* podcast.

So, these are the two current podcasts I'm running, and they can find me on Spotify, Apple iTunes and Google Podcasts.

Belynda Smith: Lovely thank you.

Susie Perkins: Thank you.

Belynda Smith: Thank you so much for joining us. It was really lovely to have you here and to discuss all of these interesting things with you. Thank you so much.

Devinder Singh: Thanks for having me thank you.

Susie Perkins: Thank you.

Belynda Smith: And thank you so much to our listeners. It was great to have you here, too! If you would like more information about Meerilinga you can contact us at mycf@meerilinga.org.au or visit www.meerilinga.org.au