

Deity Worship for Children

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An important element in preparing the home for the home schooled child is the introduction of Deity worship. Deity worship is essential in the education and training of our children because it trains the mind to focus on Krishna, and to be clean and punctual. Bhaktivinoda Thakur said in Jaiva Dharma:

“The religions which have no provision for Deity worship face the danger that those children born into the religion and those just beginning spiritual life—both of whom may have little or no understanding, or deep faith in Godhead—may become overtly materialistic and even develop aversion towards the Supreme Lord as a result of the absence of a Deity form upon which to fix their minds. Therefore, Deity worship is the foundation of religion for general humanity.”

Prabhupada also recommended Deity worship for all householders. Householders who worship Deities at home can bring up their children in a pristine atmosphere in which they practically demonstrate how to love Krishna. They can teach the children the importance of bowing down, chanting, dancing and performing services such as cleaning the temple, making flower garlands, decorating the Deities and observing festivals. Right from the beginning, they can be taught to offer everything to the Deities before using it themselves, such as food and new clothes, and also to use their talents for Krishna, such as creating artwork. In this way a child can develop natural attraction for the Lord.

Children have a playing tendency and instead of utilizing this urge in frivolous play they can play with Krishna, decorate Him, feed Him and worship Him. When they are young they can worship and play with Krishna dolls and as they get more mature they can assist their parents in Deity worship. In a letter to Stokakrsna Prabhupada wrote:

“The children should always be instructed by taking advantage of their playful mood and teaching them to play Krishna games like become cowherd boys, cows, peacocks, demons and in this way if they always think of Krsna by playing just like they are actually present in association with Krishna then they will become Krishna Conscious very quickly. In addition, there should be a little ABC, then prasadam, then worshipping the Deity, then more playing Krsna games, some kirtana, a little more ABC, like that. In this way, always keep their minds and bodies engaged in different activities because children are restless by nature so they will want to change often.”

Prabhupada gives his own example when he was a child living with his parents in Calcutta.

“So children, they generally imitate, imitate the parents' habits or activities. So fortunately we had the opportunity of getting such a father. So we are imitating our father. In my childhood I imitated my father. He was worshipping Deity of Kãñëa. So I asked him, "My dear father, I shall worship.

Give me the Deity of Krishna." So he gave me a little Deity of Krishna and Radha and I was imitating. So beginning of life... So these are actually facts. Maharaja Pariksit also, he was playing with Krishna, Krishna dolls. Just like Mirabhai. She was playing with Krishna doll and later on she became a very high-grade devotee. So these chances are there.”

Prabhupada writes about Uddhava Maharaj in Srimad Bhagavatam 2.3.16,

“From his very birth, Uddhava was a natural devotee of Lord Krishna, or a nitya-siddha, a liberated soul. From natural instinct he used to serve Lord Kãñëa, even in his childhood. He used to play with dolls in the form of Krishna, he would serve the dolls by dressing, feeding and worshipping them, and thus he was constantly absorbed in the play of transcendental realization. These are the signs of an eternally liberated soul.”

We introduced Deity worship for our boys when they were three and five years old. They had their own 4 inch Gaura Nitai deities to whom they became very attached. I was with them when they did their worship. We would take several hours to dress Them, bathe Them, and decorate Them with ornaments. Then we would make an offering followed by an arati and kirtan. Sometimes they would drop water or paraphernalia, but that is to be expected of small children.

Overall they took care of Gaura Nitai with love and respect. What was amazing was how they were absorbed for two to three hours without getting distracted. They loved the worship and we would do this everyday. Anything they ate or drank they wanted to offer to the Deities and would remind us to do the same. A transcendental mood was present all day and it was easy for them to understand that everything should be done for the pleasure of Krishna. If they were disobedient it did not take them long to give it up.

When children engage in Deity worship they understand that Krishna is a person, a friend and their worshipful object. He is approachable and He can reciprocate with them. Deity worship is a natural way of evoking love of Godhead in a child that any amount of explaining will not do.

Other side benefits that come from Deity worship is that the children understand the importance of cleanliness. They learn that they must take a bath before they touch the Deities and that even though Krishna is our friend, He is not to be treated casually or like an ordinary person. Then it is easier to make Krishna the most important member of the family who needs to be kept satisfied and happy.