

Home Schooling in the Early Years

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Children up to the age of five are strongly influenced by the behavior and habits of their parents and elders at home and tend to imitate or soak in whatever they hear or see around them. These years are laying their foundation and one can almost predict their future caliber as adults based on their training during these crucial five years. We have many examples within ISKCON of children who were raised in a Krishna conscious environment from the very beginning of their lives and are now a source of inspiration for all. On the other hand, children who are raised in non-devotional atmosphere with television and computer games for their association tend to continue doing these things in their later life.

Children's formal training begins at five, whether they go to a public school, gurukula or are taught at home by their parents. What about the years before the formal education? How do we make everything Krishna conscious for infants, toddlers and preschoolers?

Since children in that age group learn mostly by imitation the first step is to create an atmosphere at home which is surcharged with Krishna consciousness. There should be constant vibration of the holy name, hearing only Krishna katha or things related to His glorification, and performance of devotional activities such as Deity worship, prasadam distribution and preaching. This way all the senses of our children are engaged in participating, hearing or observing these activities. Without a doubt they will make advancement quickly and effortlessly.

DOVETAILING THEIR DESIRE TO PLAY

Prabhupada said that children at this age are innocent and have a tendency to play. Therefore if we channel their play to learning Krishna consciousness, they will make advancement quickly because their play will reflect how they think and act.

For infants we can surround them with Krishna conscious sights and sounds at all times such as the chanting of the holy name, live or CDs, and pictures and Deity of Krishna strategically placed in such a way so that they can look at them easily. We can be dressed nicely with tilak and neck beads and talk to them about Krishna even though they may not comprehend it all. We can find toys for them that can be related to Krishna consciousness. We can feed them with mothers' milk and when they are ready for solid foods we can cook for them special food rather than purchase baby food from stores that are popular nowadays.

For toddlers and preschoolers, besides keeping the home peaceful, clean and Krishna conscious, we can devise Krishna conscious indoor and outdoor games for them. For example, for indoor games we can give blocks, play dough, toy cooking sets and some safe items around the house and then inspire them to imitate a temple life style such as worshipping, cooking and offering. We can also engage them in some artwork such as making cards on festivals and props for plays, jewelry or bead making, and tell stories about Krishna from children's story and picture books or Prabhupada's Krishna book and the Srimad Bhagavatam. We can chant and play simple instruments with them and observe festivals by engaging them in decorating and cooking and giving them small roles in plays. Sometimes they can watch Krishna conscious videos such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana and those available from the ITV.

Toddlers can also imitate Deity worship with their own Krishna dolls. For example in Boise, we have a three-year-old devotee girl, Sugopi, who plays all day with her Krishna and Balarama dolls. Her mother does not buy her any toys, instead goes shopping with her once a

week to find a variety of things to decorate her Krishna and Balarama dolls. I go to her house to see Them decorated and ornamented differently everyday. Her mother helps her make bead necklaces, anklets and bracelets for Them. She has many different types of clothes, turban covers, jewelry and beautiful bows and she has learned to use them. Every morning Sugopi does mangala arti for Them, then decorates Them profusely with flowers and other paraphernalia and make an offering of food. Then she goes around the community to invite mothers and children for Srinagar Aarti and guru puja at home. She puts on the Govindam prayers, shows Her Deities the mirror and does another aartik with kirtana. Both the mother and daughter tell me they experience similar feelings like in a temple. Everyday when Sugopi walks over to the big temple to see Radha Bankebihari she looks at the temple Deities very closely for different ideas how to make her own Deities as beautiful as Them. Occasionally she will ask me for a peacock feather or a new cloth for the turbans. Sometimes she will play Damodara lila with me when she is Mother Yasoda and I am Krishna . Since she takes care of Krishna and Balarama she sees herself in a position of a mother. The rest of the day she hears stories about Krishna (she can elaborately describe some stories), learns numbers and alphabets, plays with other devotee children in the community or participates in the temple programs. When she wants to eat snacks, cookies, cakes or even candy her mother will immediately satisfy her desire by making them at home.

Children raised in this kind of environment know nothing but Krishna and are happy and peaceful. Prabhupada emphasized that to give our children Krishna consciousness is actually “real education.” In an arrival lecture in Dallas in 1975, Prabhupada said: “If we simply learn how to worship Krsna, how to please Him, how to dress Him nicely, how to give Him nice foodstuff, how to decorate Him with ornaments and flowers, how to offer our respectful obeisances unto Him, how to chant His name, in this way, if we simply think, without any so-called education we become the perfect person within the universe. This is Krsna consciousness. It doesn't require A-B-C-D education. It requires simply change of consciousness. So if these children are being taught from the very beginning of their life... We had the opportunity of being trained up by our parents like this.”

For outdoor games and play children can be inspired to play Krishna conscious games. In a letter to Stokakrsna in 1972, Prabhupada wrote: “The children should always be instructed by taking advantage of their playful mood and teaching them to play Krsna 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 Krsna then they will become Krsna Conscious very quickly..”

Sports like swimming and wrestling are also good and can be made Krishna conscious by reminding them of Krishna pastimes in Vrndavana such as His sports in the river Yamuna or His wrestling match with Kamsa's men in Mathura. They can also enact sword, bow and arrow or club fights from the Mahabharata or the Ramayana or Krishna's pastimes in Vrndavana.

DON'T LET THEM WASTE THEIR TIME

We can find many other creative ways to engage our children in serving Krishna in these early tender years of their life. For many parents though, the challenge is how to engage them so completely that they do not waste their time in frivolous things. In a morning walk conversation in 1974 in Los Angeles , Prabhupada compared the tendency of a materialist to waste time with children.

Prabhupada: This is the difficulty. Na te viduh svartha-gatim hi visnum [SB 7.5.31]. Because they are rascal, they do not know how to utilize time, what is the aim of life, where you have to go. These things they don't know. So they must waste time. So it is the... Just like child. He

wastes time in so many ways. It is the duty of the parents, guardians, to cr..., synchronize his activities so that he may not waste his time. It is the duty of the guardians. Similarly these rascals, they're wasting time. You have to engage them in Krsna consciousness. Then their time will be utilized.”

Of course this requires a lot of patience and tolerance and sometimes we run out of that. To make sure that they were always engaged , I took my children everywhere I went - to home programs, harinams, book distribution, festivals, Rathayatras, other temples for vacation and preaching programs in the schools and the city parks. So even though they were too young to participate fully, exposure to these activities was very beneficial because they developed an attraction for devotional service and found role models whom they can emulate.