

Homeschooling from ages 5 to 10

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Children's formal education begins when they are five years old. For most of us, until we came under the shelter of Srila Prabhupada, education meant finding reputable schools with good academics. Good academic study meant good jobs, sufficient money and comfortable family life. However, Prabhupada has now changed our whole thinking process. He is challenging us to think more deeply about what real education is. In a lecture in Vrndavan in 1976 he said:

“Education means bhagavata education: to understand God. That is wanted. Athato brahma jijnasa. Education should be given in such a way that the student should be very, very inquisitive. Inquisitive what about? Inquisitive about Brahman, not about this body.”

Therefore, the education that the Vedas glorify and recommend is one that evokes the natural curiosity of the child to inquire about the Supreme Absolute Truth. Why is this education better than what most of us received? Just as a child needs to learn reading and math to get along in this world, he also needs to know his spiritual identity, the purpose of life and how to get out of this material world. Children who understand that they are spirit souls meant to serve the Supreme Lord will not waste the human life and instead will help others find the real meaning of life.

Keeping Prabhupada's instructions at heart, we can educate our children in a way that incorporates both academic and spiritual training. This is what we tried to do in our home schooling. We called it the five R's. If children master these five R's in their early years, they will be prepared to study any subject in the future. In this article we will cover the first one.

Reading

wRiting

aRithmetic

Rote (memorization)

Raga (music)

LEARNING HOW TO READ

Children between the ages of three and five can learn how to read. In our Boise temple community we have several families who are home schooling their children. Once a week they get together to teach their children how to read collectively. The children are of different ages from three to seven years old.

The oldest Emily (seven) and Laura (five) can read Prabhupada's books fluently, and so they come with their mother to help the younger children learn how to read. Collectively they review the sounds for each letter of the alphabet. Then they break up into pairs depending on age and proficiency level. For each pair, there is a mother to guide, correct, review and teach new sounds. The atmosphere is joyful and the children are enthusiastic to learn. Engaging the older children in teaching the younger ones is beneficial for both. The subject matter is reinforced for the older children and the younger siblings are inspired to learn better.

There are many Krishna conscious books available on line on www.krishna.com and www.krishnaculture.com that make good reading books for beginners. Starting at the age of six, children can try to read Srila Prabhupada's books such as Krishna Book, Bhagavad-gita, Srimad Bhagavatam and the Caitanya Caritamrta. They may not understand the finer points and also stumble with words or phrases but with help from their mother, they will overcome those hurdles and will benefit both spiritually and academically. There are other books written by senior devotees that are also good as reading resources. Some examples are the Prabhupada Lilamrta, the Six Goswamis of Vrndavan, Vaishnava Acharyas, the Diary of a Traveling Preacher and many others. These are also valuable for reading during festivals and for special study units.

Reading to the children is also valuable. It increases their comprehension and vocabulary. I regularly read to my sons at night before they went to bed. Our favorite book was Prabhupada Lilamrta and they would be so absorbed in hearing that they did not want me to stop reading. We loved this time together discussing Srila Prabhupada's transcendental pastimes – his staunch faith, his struggles in India and the West and his ultimate success in spreading the mission of Lord Caitanya to all corners of the world!

Prabhupada wanted his books deeply studied by children in gurukula. With this knowledge, he said, they can find solutions to all problems and also become good citizens or leaders in society. One who does not know the purpose of life cannot help anyone, not even himself. Therefore in Vedic society all great leaders of society were great devotees and holy sages who were able to give their subjects guidance in the mission of life.

Prabhupada was confident that his books were complete and could award all material and spiritual benedictions. But he warned that unless his books were taught to the children in an atmosphere of love and trust they will have little effect. In a letter to a disciple in 1972 he said:

“Let them be able to read our books very nicely, and that will be their higher education. Keep them always happy in Krishna Consciousness, and do not try to force or punish or they will get the wrong idea. By and by, if they are satisfied in this way, they will all grow up to be first-class preachers and devotees.”

Discussion is an important part of reading. It breaks the monotony of reading and we can make it interesting and challenging for our children. Below are some of the advantages of using Srila Prabhupada's books as our reading, study, and discussion books:

Prabhupada's books help with all aspects of the language arts, namely composition, comprehension, vocabulary as well as critical and analytical thinking and reasoning.

The parents can bring in their own realizations and instill finer points of the philosophy in a way understandable to the children.

Children can express themselves and clear their doubts, thereby gaining in self confidence and communication skills. The parents can establish the supremacy of the Vedic literatures by playing the devil's advocate, or bringing the issues to practical life. Reading and discussion lead to good speaking, debate and logical thinking. Prabhupada said that the reading of his books is pure devotional activity. One can become a pure devotee just by reading the scriptures. The heroes in the scriptures have impeccable character and qualities and these will rub on the readers, especially on young impressionable minds. The books bring out the natural inquisitiveness in children and encourage respectful inquiry. Reading is effective in association with a pure devotee, Srila Prabhupada. The potency of the books has a miraculous effect on the children. Even a five-year-old starts reading quite fluently even though he or she may not comprehend everything. Early in their life, children can understand deep philosophical issues that even adults have a hard time comprehending.