

Teaching Our Children to Eat Only Prasadam

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Another thing we can do within the home to make it pure and conducive to learning for our children is honoring only prasadam and avoiding all unoffered foods cooked by non-devotees. Lord Caitanya, the yuga avatar for this age of Kali, emphasized the chanting of the holy name as the only means of achieving love of God in this age of Kali. Unlike other incarnations that came to annihilate demons this most merciful form of the Lord used instead a secret weapon to subdue the demoniac mentality in this age. It was the chanting of the holy name and distribution of prasadam--food that has been offered to Krishna with love and devotion. Just like we can tame any animal by feeding it food, similarly all demoniac tendencies within us can be tamed and eradicated by eating prasadam. Eating and distributing only prasadam is so important that in many cases it may be the only way of melting cold hearts that have forgotten Krishna from time immemorial.

Every devotee can tell many stories in this regard. No amount of philosophical discussion can do as much as a plate of prasadam in changing people's hearts.

This is especially true in the case of children for whom eating is a very important activity. There should be plenty of nutritious prasadam for them at all times. The standard menu can be dal, rice subji and chapatis if possible. Children get easily attracted to all kinds of foods and if we want them to avoid unoffered foods we will have to substitute those foods with a variety of prasadam at home. By keeping them satisfied with delicious prasadam in their early years they are peaceful and their senses are controlled. When they get older other interests take over and they don't need so much of variety and can be happy with simple prasadam. Srila Prabhupada said that children should be given as much as they want for they don't need to exercise control. In a letter to Aniruddha in 1972, he wrote: "Rising early and mangal arati, this is enough austerity. Besides that, let them learn something, chant, dance, eat as much prasadam as they like, and do not mind if they have playful nature—let them also play and run, that is natural. It is nice if they eat often—if children over eat it doesn't matter, that is no mistake."

Prabhupada also said that parents should take good care of their children. That is their first duty. If the children are not healthy then how they can learn? If they are undernourished it is not good for their Krishna consciousness. They must drink enough milk and then dal,

chapattis, vegetables, and fruit will keep them always fit. There is no need of luxurious fatty foods but milk is essential.

What about pizza parties at friends' homes or even at restaurants? Pizza or any food that has been purchased outside or cooked by non-devotees, we should definitely avoid eating or giving to our children. The Hari Bhakti Vilasa says that food (especially grains) which is cooked by non-Vaiñëavas or by sinful people, or which has not been offered to Viñëu, is the same as meat because the consciousness of the cook enters into the food he prepares.

Therefore the cook should strive to be Krishna conscious while in the kitchen. The kitchen, where the Lord's food is prepared, is an extension of the Deity room, where He eats.

Prabhupada also emphasized that one should clearly understand the principles of cleanliness--how a person or object becomes contaminated, how contamination is transferred, and how things are purified.

We can make our own pizza or cake and take it to the party. If we explain our dietary guidelines to the hosts they will usually understand. (You can tell them that as strict vegetarians, we don't eat anything that is cooked in a meat kitchen. This is similar to the kitchen rules in a Jewish kosher diet.) Or if that is not possible, skip the party altogether. Instead we can make pizza at home and offer it to Krishna and then enjoy the prasada at home. When the children are too young to understand why they cannot eat outside at restaurant or the homes of non-devotees, it is good to offer them something better at home which is prasadam so that they will not feel deprived. When they are older, from about ten years old, it is not necessary to substitute as much. They are old enough to understand why the austerity is necessary and even come to enjoy it. My son, Gopal, told me years later that he had always enjoyed this feeling of avoiding non-offered foods at parties and other occasions as though he had a secret pact with Krishna that we would not eat anything unless He ate it. Often little children will use these occasions as an opportunity to innocently tell their friends about Krishna or vegetarianism.

Children can be quite bold and confident when they know that they have the support of their parents and Krishna.

So the early years of careful cooking and feeding our children only prasadam will pay off later in their life when they actually lose the taste for unoffered food and their hearts become purified. Later when they venture out on their own, due to good training they will follow the principle of eating only prasadam in spite of any difficulties that may arise.