

Children and Pets

By Urmila Devi Dasi

A BOY AND HIS DOG, at least in America, is a symbol of friendship and of healthy psychological development. Srila Prabhupada, however, said that keeping pet dogs is a symptom of how the world has lost Vedic culture.

People sometimes say that giving children pets to love helps children develop universal love. But we can easily see that it doesn't work. Children love their dogs, cats, hamsters, and lizards, yes, but they eat cows, fish, sheep, and chickens. Some children on farms even learn to arrange for the slaughter of animals they pampered as pets.

Both pampering and slaughtering stem from a desire to please oneself, or, more accurately, from a desire to please the senses and mind with which one falsely identifies. So teaching a child to love a pet because the pet is cute or loyal or cuddly simply binds the child to valuing bodily pleasure instead of spiritual pleasure.

Couldn't a child being trained in Krsna consciousness keep a pet without becoming materially entangled?

In a few instances in the scriptures, pure devotees of Krsna have shown affection to an animal in such a way that the devotee wasn't degraded and the animal spiritually benefited. One story concerns Sivananda Sena's kindness to a dog. While Sivananda was leading a group of devotees to Puri to see Lord Caitanya Mahaprabhu, a stray dog joined them. Sivananda arranged for the dog's food and even paid its passage on a ferry. Sivananda's association so spiritually purified the dog that it got Lord Caitanya's audience and attained Vaikuntha, the kingdom of God.

But not all elevated souls have the same effect on an animal. Bharata Maharaja, an emperor of the world who had retired to the forest for spiritual practices, took pity on an orphaned deer and raised it. But he became so attached to the deer that he neglected his spiritual life, died thinking of the deer, and had to spend one life as a deer before returning to the human form to perfect his realization. We don't read that the deer received spiritual benefit from Bharata Maharaja's care.

We need to teach our children lessons from both these examples. From Sivananda Sena's story we can teach them to give animals *prasadam*, food offered to Krsna, and to chant the Hare Krsna mantra to the soul in the animal's body. From Bharata Maharaja's story we can teach that we should not take an animal into our lives and hearts in place of the Lord.

In neither story did the devotee buy an animal with the idea of loving it. The animals came for shelter, and the devotees simply wanted to benefit them. If even under such circumstances Bharata thought of his own material pleasure in the animal's company, then how much more difficult it would be for our children to maintain the proper attitude with an animal we have

bought to please them. Children don't need pets. If an animal comes, we can guide our children in giving it material and spiritual care.

Devotees of Krsna may use animals in practical ways in the Lord's service. A dog can guard the temple or catch animals that disturb crops. A cow can give us milk to offer to Krsna and dung to fertilize the land. If we are fortunate enough to have working animals under our care, our children will certainly benefit from having chores related to the animals and seeing how to engage them in Krsna's service.

To keep a cow, especially, is considered a religious activity. The cow is a symbol of religious life, and Lord Krsna is known as the protector and well-wisher of the cow. So helping care for a cow, though not much of an option for city dwellers, is a Vedic way for a child to advance in Krsna consciousness.

Finally we need to train our children in specific guidelines about animals. Carnivorous animal such as dogs and cats should never be allowed in a house. Prabhupada calls such animals untouchable, because touching them invites disease and make one's clothes and body unclean for worshiping Krsna. Indeed, it is offensive to offer food to the Lord that a lower animal such as a dog or cat has seen first. And while a carnivorous animal freely living outside can catch and eat other animals without sin, if we buy pet food made from meat, fish, or eggs we contribute to the slaughter of innocent creatures.

Let us teach our children to show spiritually equal vision by giving all creatures the opportunity to engage in Krsna's service. Let us not allow our children to develop material attachments for an animal body.

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