

Just Say No to No

By Urmila Devi Dasi

THREE ADULTS ARE taking a group of children on an educational excursion, and the "no's" begin.

"Don't climb on that fence!"

"Stop putting your hand in your nose!"

"Please stop hitting Visakha!"

"You're making too much noise!" A lot of instruction about what not to do.

Educator Michael Grinder calls telling someone what not to do a "double message." He compares it to telling someone, "Don't think of a cow." What happens? The person thinks of a cow.

Grinder suggests putting our messages into positive form. For example, instead of saying, "Don't climb on that fence," we can say what we would like the child to do: "Please stay on the sidewalk." Grinder even suggests that the adult's actions when giving the instruction be in harmony with the instruction. For example, if a teacher says, "Sit quietly," while walking around the classroom, the children will get a double message. The teacher should also be sitting.

After becoming aware of how often I admonished children for behavior and attitudes I didn't want, I gradually changed to a more positive approach. Not only does emphasizing the positive get better results, it also fosters an atmosphere of mutual respect.

In presenting spiritual life, to stop harmful behavior Srila Prabhupada encouraged positive activities and thoughts. He suggested that method for giving children spiritual and moral instruction. In Paris, 1976, he told Jyotirmayi Dasi, "Don't say 'no,' but give a taste for the good, then it will be automatically 'no.' If you say 'no,' then [the children] will rebel. If they develop Krsna consciousness, it will be automatically 'no.' "

In these instructions Srila Prabhupada was not promoting a sentimental permissiveness. He always expected us to keep our children from anything spiritually or materially harmful. His point is rather that a child busy in Krsna consciousness cannot also be busy in illusion. Srila Prabhupada would give the example that not even a drop of ink can enter a cup already full of milk. Once he told a disciple that we have a "no-gap" philosophy—we keep always active in serving Lord Krsna, leaving no opportunity for materialistic life.

To practice positive life with children, we have to consider, "What *do* we want them to do? What *do* we want them to say?"

Let's consider the following typical situation.

A group of women were sitting in the dining area. One woman had her six-year-old son with her.

"Get me some water, Mommy!" he demanded.

After lecturing him for several minutes about the importance of politeness, she got him a cup of water. Her mistake? She never told him the appropriate words and tone of voice he should use to be polite.

If we've grown accustomed to simply telling our children what *not* to do, changing our habits may take time. But we have to realize that it is we who must engineer each day so that the child's life will be related to Krsna.

Sometimes, of course, a child will reject our positive approach. Here's an example of dealing with such situations. Suppose a child rudely demands water, so you instruct, "Say, 'Would you get me a cup of water, please?' " If the child refuses to comply, don't get the water. The child may decide to get his or her own water, but you will have sidestepped the battle of wills that brings rebellion.

Here's another example of using positive reinforcement. Suppose your child brings you a drawing of a mundane war scene. You can say, "Oh! These people are killing and dying without benefit because Lord Krsna is not involved. Come, let's look in the *Bhagavatam* and find a story where Krsna is fighting. I'll help you plan the picture." If the child doesn't want to draw something about Krsna, you can respond, "I'm happy to see your creativity, and I also like to see pictures that remind me of Krsna so I can love Him more and more. Just let me know when you'd like to draw that kind of picture. I'm ready to help."

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