

Nursery Nectar

By Urmila Devi Dasi

TWO YEARS OLD, Lalita Madhava sits with all her concentration focused on the book our 14-year-old daughter is showing her. Lalita Madhava's older sister has just graduated from our *gurukula* school, her mother is at our house to print a letter, and Lalita Madhava is thinking of Krsna's pastimes. "Krsna," she says and points to the picture. She carefully turns the page.

Having spent more than three years teaching a Krsna conscious nursery school, I am privy to a great secret: there is an ocean of sweet spiritual pleasure in the company of very young devotees of Krsna. They know nothing of local, national, or global politics. They hardly know if they are boys or girls. But they do know they love Krsna. In their company one can simply tell stories about the Lord, sing songs to glorify Him, and play games that absorb the mind in His service. A well-run nursery fully engages the mind of the teacher, challenging her intelligence and creativity.

The parents also will be pleased. At home, most mothers have to divide their minds between their children and their household work. So a mother is pleased to see her child in a happy spiritual place with a devotee whose sole duty is to teach the child.

Children who have taken part in a materially and spiritually lively nursery school can look back upon their early childhood with pleasure. Even as teenagers, they can still enjoy singing the simple English, Sanskrit, or Bengali songs about Krsna they learned in nursery. The joy of decorating Krsna's picture with colored beads can broaden into a desire to dress the Deity. A child can grow up feeling that constant engagement in the Lord's service is natural.

So what should children do at a nursery school? Here are some activities for children aged 2 to 5. Although these activities are best suited for a teacher and a group of children, any mother at home could use most of these ideas.

The key to successful activities is keep changing them before the children grow restless and wild. Vary what you do and how long you do it, according to the mood and needs of the children. For example, if many children are restless, spend more time on physically active programs. If most of the children are older, spend more time on things that call for patience. As much as possible, all the children should do the same activity together. When an activity is over, the children should put everything away, and clean the floor and tables if need be. If you don't want to lose everything in your nursery, best to keep the things for separate activities separate.

You can engage the children three ways: in free, loosely supervised play, in all working at once on their own projects, and in all doing the same thing together.

A. Loosely supervised play:

This includes things like playing outdoors on swings and slides, looking at nature books, and playing with blocks and toys. With blocks, children can build temples, altars, and items for

spreading Krsna consciousness, such as cars in which they can go to distribute books. With toys the children can play their way into Krsna's pastimes—by cooking for Krsna, taking care of baby Krsna, or acting as cowherd boys frolicking with the cows, frogs, and birds of Vrndavana.

B. All working at once on their own projects:

All together but each on his own, children can work with clay, or play with puzzles, or make garlands, or decorate pictures of Krsna and His devotees.

With clay the children can play at cooking food for Krsna or building things for Krsna. With jigsaw puzzles children can put together Krsna's pastimes.

As for garlands, children can make them from wooden or plastic beads you can get at a hobby or craft store. The children can sit before a picture or Deity of Krsna, and each child can make a nice garland for Him. The children can offer their garlands with the teacher's help, and all the children can see and admire the garlands of the others. Through garlands, also, the children can learn about colors, patterns, and counting.

Children can enjoy decorating pictures of Krsna and His devotees. The pictures can come from old calendars or extra copies of *Back to Godhead*, or the children can use pictures they have painted or colored themselves. With the teacher's help, the children can adorn the pictures with stars, jewels, glitter, and paper flowers.

C. All doing the same thing:

Together, children can learn simple songs, and they can chant Hare Krsna and dance. The children who are able can take turns leading.

The children can also take turns fanning Krsna and offering Him incense and flowers, as adults do in the ceremony of *arati*.

Children can also do something else together that is very important in devotional life: take *prasadam*, food first offered to Krsna. They can learn how to say their prayers, respect *prasadam*, think of Krsna, and enjoy. And they can learn how to be clean.

Children can also put on plays about Krsna. The teacher gives a child one line to say and one thing to do at a time. Keep things simple and active and the children can do three plays or more without boredom.

You can delight your children with Krsna conscious storytelling. More than just reading a story, you can sing a song about the story, show pictures, and act out the story. There are many tapes of Krsna conscious story songs.

Children enjoy movies showing plays and stories and festivals. But go easy on video during the child's early years. It can hamper a child's natural development. A total of one hour a week is a good limit.

An entire community benefits from the nursery school. It gives mothers more time to help in a local temple or project. And even when there isn't a school, a mother at home will find that an hour or two spent creating a nursery-school atmosphere will make her children so happy she can devote more time to other service.

If we treat our children with care from the very beginning, they'll feel encouraged as souls. They'll give spiritual pleasure to everyone and give hope for the future. And by their behavior and enthusiasm they may sometimes melt the heart of even the most hardened atheist.

Urmila Devi Dasi was initiated in 1973 and has been involved in ISKCON education since 1983. She, her husband, and their three children live at the ISKCON community in Hillsborough, North Carolina, where she runs a growing school for boys and girls aged 5-18. She is the major author and compiler of Vaikuntha Children, a gurukula classroom guidebook.