

Teens and Celibacy

By Urmila Devi Dasi

CELIBACY IS SUCH an important part of Vedic education that the Sanskrit word for student is *brahmacari* ("celibate"). The pressure to give up celibacy begins, of course, in adolescence, the most dangerous age and often the turning point of one's life. Young adults need guidance before and during the teenage years to recognize and follow the right path.

Celibacy trains adolescents for self-restraint, whether they stay single or get married. It develops their inner strength, self-control, and good character. It also fosters good health and a fine memory.

Without celibacy we can never realize that we are spirit soul, distinct from the body. Sex reinforces the illusion that we are these bodies. Sexual attraction and its extensions in family and society are the main knots that bind us to material identification. Vedic education aims to free the child from these knots so the adolescent can act on the spiritual plane.

Children, of course, have no knowledge of sex. How do we train them to value celibacy before they reach puberty? By association and environment.

Modern educators know well how children's early impressions influence their later moral behavior. And these educators are passing on their decadent moral values to our children. For example, the New York City public school board recently introduced textbooks in the first grade that show families with two "mommies" or two "daddies," to get children used to homosexuality.

And schools aren't the only place kids learn to think well of illicit sex. Role models such as those on television, on radio, and in politics keep reinforcing the message. Parents add to the negative influence by using contraceptives or cheating on their marriage vows.

The result, of course, is that children enter adolescence with attitudes that lead them away from self-realization, or even civilized life. The illicit sex that results from years of indoctrination leads to chaos. Yet the very educators and politicians who promote illicit sex to children talk on about fatherless families and unwanted kids who turn to crime and drugs.

To be trained in celibacy, our young students should live with people who take pleasure in Krsna consciousness. Our first task is to shield our children from materialistic influences and surround them with positive, transcendental life. That's the only way to get them ready to face their transition into adulthood.

But childhood training isn't enough. Prabhupada told us we must carefully guide our children during their teens. Then surely they will come out first-class Krsna conscious devotees. We should be like a commanding officer who not only trains his soldiers but also serves with them on the battlefield.

Traditionally, a spiritually guided society helped young people with good association, vocational training, and marriage. Our teenagers need to train and study with Krsna conscious friends and teachers. Otherwise, Prabhupada once said, if from twelve to fifteen years of age they go to an ordinary school, by bad company they become rotten. It is sad to see this happen to a child who had strong childhood training and could have become a first-class human being.

Despite the best training and the best company, most teenagers want to associate with the opposite sex. Therefore, Vedic culture prescribes early marriage, on religious principles. That kind of marriage makes the mind peaceful and receptive to spiritual instruction.

Parents must help their sons and daughters find suitable marriage partners, except for children who are going to stay happy in lifelong celibacy. Parents should understand that adolescents have only three choices in sexual morality: celibacy, marriage, or immorality. Because of the danger in a society where boys and girls mix freely, marriage should be encouraged.

We sometimes mistakenly think that an "arranged" marriage means that the parents force a twelve-year-old girl to marry a thirty-year-old man—and they meet for the first time at the wedding. Prabhupada gives us a different picture. He tells us of a gradual process, usually spanning several years. The parents look for a suitable partner for their child, taking into account that the boy and girl should be equal in character, qualities, social position, and renunciation.

The parents judge the match through their own observations, by asking others, and through astrology. The wishes of the boy and girl are also important. Once the families and the boy and girl agree, a period of occasional, supervised association begins. It's as if the parents introduce their child to a suitable mate and then chaperone formal "dates" to prepare the children for marriage. When the children are old enough to marry, the girl may still spend long regular visits at her parents' home so she may gradually get used to being a wife. An extended family makes this easier by helping the new couple in their duties and relationship.

This time-tested process can be easily followed today. The girl engaged to a suitable boy doesn't have to advertise herself to find a man. And the boy knows he can't marry until he becomes responsible. He is therefore motivated to mature into a conscientious man of good character.

Built on the early training in renunciation, their marriage will be dedicated to Krsna, fulfilling our hope for their future.

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