

The Playful Mood

By Urmila Devi Dasi

FIFTEEN CHILDREN between two and five years old stood at one end of our living room. Some inched away from the wall. All waited.

"Be cowherd boys!" I called, and the children pretended to blow flutes and horns or bring a cow by a rope. Pretending in this way, they went as quickly as possible to the other side of the room and back. (Having a living room with little furniture was an advantage.) My infant son squirmed in my arms and tried to join the fun.

"Ambarish won!" I announced. "He got back first, playing like a cowherd boy the whole time. Now, ready again. Be fish!"

I set the baby in a crib and demonstrated pretend swimming.

Prabhupada has given us a wonderful process of molding activity to awaken love for Krsna. Even children involved in games, toys, and playing can be guided to use their playful mood to their spiritual advantage. Then Krsna consciousness will easily arise in their hearts.

Saintly children such as Dhruva, Prahlada, and Narada shunned childish playthings. And Prabhupada noted that one child of his disciples rejected ordinary toys as "*maya*." Yet while we don't want to encourage toys and games that will lead to forgetfulness of Krsna, for children to play in a transcendental way is natural and beneficial.

Babies

Babies start to play when they like to grasp and move objects, at about three months. My husband and I made a mobile of pictures of Krsna and hung it above our first baby's sleeping place, carefully putting it out of range of the child's feet.

Soon a baby can sit and then crawl. Children this age need playthings just to keep out of mischief and distress. They like toys they can crawl or walk with, such as a toy wooden bull on wheels with a string. As far as possible, we selected toys to remind our child of Krsna's pastimes, such as cows, peacocks, and elephants.

Very young babies love to look at pictures of Krsna's pastimes. Prabhupada told us to show the pictures and not give them directly to the child, who might disrespect them. So we put pictures on the walls near the floor and covered them with plastic. Our children would crawl to them and touch them. We also made books filled with pictures from extra BTGs and worn-out book covers (and put plain covers on them so that no picture would touch our feet or the floor).

As a child masters language, he or she will point at the pictures again and again. "Krsna," he'll say, and then "Krsna kills the demon."

Pre-School

As children mature, they like to play not just around other children but with them. Krsna Himself showed the ideal play for children of this age. Children in the country can go in groups to herd calves, playing by a lake or river in the open air. This is their "education." They will play leapfrog, imitate animals, build with dirt, sand, and sticks, and use their vast imagination. What is the need of purchased toys and games?

Unfortunately, even those of us who live in the country may not have calves for our children to care for, nor are we always blessed with ideal weather. And we worry about thieves and kidnappers. So children can pretend to herd cows and may have to settle for playground equipment in place of rocks, vines, and rivers.

The main way to direct the play of small children toward Krsna is to surround them with devotional service. The children will then imitate. If they see adults cook for Krsna, the children will make mud pies and "offer" them, pretending that a stone or tree is Krsna. One of our children built temples out of blocks, set up dead batteries for Deities, and then imitated the worship he'd seen at the temple.

Young children learn of Krsna by looking through Prabhupada's books, which are lavishly illustrated. The children then love to imitate Krsna's pastimes. We had a collection of make-up, cloth scraps, and inexpensive props from a costume shop. When our child's friends came over, they had fun dressing as Krsna, Balarama, mother Yasoda, and demons such as Bakasura.

"Now, Yasoda," I would say to my daughter, "tell Krsna to play nicely today."

"Play nicely today," she would say.

One of my friends plays like this with just herself and her three-year-old daughter.

"I'm Krsna. You're Balarama," the child says, and they put on cloths as belts and turbans, dancing through the house pretending to call their cows.

Pre-schoolers enjoy simple toys such as measuring cups and a bowl of water. They like to build and create with blocks and clay. If they keep to such simple toys, they will learn to be happy without extravagant arrangements. Modern toy manufacturers push movies and television shows through which to market related toys. Such toys stimulate a child's hankering for a flood of electronic wonders, of which they soon tire. And the nature of such toys! If we walk through the aisle of a toy store, we see gruesome toys of terror. If we want to raise saintly children, we should avoid such things.

In contrast, I know of one teenage girl who made her little sister beautiful felt toys—felt figures of Radha and Krsna, felt clothes, and felt altars. One parent made beautiful puppets for her children. In another family, the father draws pictures of Krsna on canvas, and the mother and children fill them in with needlepoint. A little time and creativity can give a child eternal benefit.

Ages Five Through Twelve

As children progress through school, their time for play gradually decreases. Their lives become filled with learning and chores. Yet through these years a child still wants to play.

At this age, children can still use simple toys such as blocks to imitate devotional service, though their play becomes more complex. They'll want outdoor games with friends to become more organized, with rules about winning and losing. Prabhupada mentioned tag, swimming, running games, and kite-flying as suitable games for children. He discouraged highly organized and competitive games that mimic professional sports and take up so much of Western children's time and energy. That children emotionally and physically need to run and jump doesn't mean they need to join the local Little League. Some devotees have adapted many outdoor games so that children will grow in spiritual consciousness while they play. (See sidebar.)

Children in these years like to make dioramas of Krsna's pastimes. In the gurukula we plan diorama projects for various festivals. We also organize dramas of spiritual philosophy or Krsna's pastimes. As the children grow and can perform dramas for public viewing, we spend time rehearsing and making costumes, scenery, and sound effects. Children also often play at dramas informally with their friends.

During these years children often like games that challenge their logic, memory, and intelligence. Because Srila Prabhupada considered games such as crossword puzzles a waste of time, we want to carefully choose games that teach our children if not about Krsna then at least skills and knowledge they can use to serve Krsna. Games that supercharge the mind and senses simply increase a child's identification with the body. I know of many parents and teachers who, especially when a group of children gather, arrange for contests in knowledge of scripture. This must be done according to the age of the children and in such a way that it is not too competitive and stressful.

What of the increasingly popular computer and video games that begin to appeal to children during these years? There is excellent educational computer software for teaching math, English, history, and geography. Just as we devotees get children playing spiritually, programmers get children playing to learn. That is a valid use of games for our children, but we should make certain, first, that what is learned is really essential and, second, that it's the major component of the software. If all a game is said to do is teach eleven-year-olds hand and eye coordination, it's probably worthless.

Generally, if our children are playing video games we can take it as a sign that we're failing to provide them useful work to play at. Just as Prabhupada tells us that children will take the work of herding calves as play, so children can take pleasure in growing a garden, learning to cook, and helping with adult devotional service.

Perhaps the most important play during this age is festivals and Deity worship. When Srila Prabhupada was a boy, he organized a Rathayatra festival, much as other children organize games for their friends. His father also gave him Deities to worship. Prabhupada describes this Deity worship by young children as play. That doesn't mean a child can put the Deity on the

floor or on his bed like a stuffed toy. (I don't suggest Deity worship for children under five, or for those who regularly put their hands or other objects in their mouth.) Yet a child is excused from the strict rules of Deity worship. Children can bathe and dress their Deity once a week and make a daily offering of food. By chanting before the Deity and offering incense and flowers, a child learns to progress in spiritual life. King Pariksit and Mirabai, both great devotees from childhood, were trained in that way. Prabhupada suggests that the worship can become formal when a child is ten or twelve.

Thirteen to Sixteen

When a child enters adolescence, the desire to play decreases. Yet I've seen fourteen-year-old girls binding their eyes like Gandhari to enact scenes from the *Mahabharata*. Just today a fourteen-year-old boy picked up a kindergarten boy. "Grrr! I'll tear Hiranyakasipu to pieces!" the older boy growled, pretending to be Lord Nrsimha. Teenagers can organize their own plays and puppet shows or create intricate works of art and music.

Perhaps at this age, especially for boys, sports becomes a question. Again, while these growing adolescents need fresh air and exercise, it is better to meet those needs through their service than arrange for separate sports. And if children need some specific program of exercise, we should keep things in balance and not get overwhelmed with caring for the body.

As we watch our children play, we can remember that the whole material world is like a toy given by the Lord so that we can act in a perverted imitation of His pastimes. Even our adult activities, therefore, are merely games with no lasting consequence or meaning unless we engage in the service of the Lord.

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Krsna Conscious Games

Let's Catch Krsna First

The leader chants one Hare Krsna mantra while pointing from player to player with each word. The last person pointed to plays as Krsna. Krsna takes in His hand a big peacock feather (or a big leaf or flower representing a peacock feather) so the other players can easily recognize Him. He runs a little ahead, and then all the other children—the cowherd boys—must try to tag Him. Whoever tags Krsna first becomes the next Krsna, and the previous Krsna becomes one of the cowherd boys. The previous Krsna must hand the peacock feather to the new Krsna while still running and then let the new Krsna get a little bit ahead. Then everyone runs after the new Krsna. The players must keep careful track of who is Krsna at each stage of the game.

Fun Storytelling

This game is meant for children well versed in Krsna's pastimes. The leader (using again the one-mantra method) selects the first child to tell a story. The storyteller is supposed to purposely make funny mistakes from time to time. For example, he will say, "Krsna stole the *gopis'* *capatis* (instead of clothes) and hung them on a tree," or "Mother Yasoda ran after Krsna with a cow (instead of a stick) in her hand." The other children must correct the mistakes.

From *The Book of Krsna Conscious Games*, Bala Books, 1981.