

Training Through The Stages of Childhood

By Urmila Devi Dasi

WHAT WE CALL "a child" is simply a soul in a particular type of physical and mental dress. And by understanding the stages of material growth through which the child progresses, we can help the soul attain ultimate freedom.

The sage Canakya saw these stages in terms of how a child can accept responsibility. He wrote that until age five little responsibility can be expected and so the child should be treated with leniency. From five to ten the child's responsibility should gradually increase, and with it the discipline with which the child is treated. From ten to sixteen the adolescent should be treated "as strictly as a tiger," so that he or she doesn't even think of being irresponsible. At sixteen, the young adult should be treated as a friend.

Besides discipline and responsibility, many other things change as a child develops. A child builds his understanding of reality somewhat as a person builds a house. In infancy the land is clear for development. Then the child assembles facts, ideas, and modes of behavior as a builder might collect piles of brick, glass, and wood. An adolescent tries to put childhood understanding into a sensible whole with the tools of maturing intelligence the way a builder creates a structure with the materials he has collected. And a young adult integrates his life with his world view the way a resident finally moves into a completed building, making it suitable for his use.

How can we make sure our child's spiritual and material training match his changing needs and strengths?

Cleared Land and Foundation (Birth to Age Five)

When we read that Canakya advocates leniency from birth to age five, we might think he wants young children to be spoiled tyrants. Not so. Rather, children should be free from too much care and responsibility. They benefit from, and should learn, basic skills of eating, cleanliness, and respect for the Lord's temple. Young children can also take on small responsibilities at home. In *Bringing Up Kids Without Tearing Them Down*, Dr. Kevin Leman suggests that two- and three-year-olds can have such tasks as setting up for meals and cleaning their own messes, and four-year-olds can put groceries away or get the mail. I have found that most children by the age of two or two and a half can learn to sit quietly through a lecture and eat Krsna-prasadam with respect.

It may seem odd that the ages for the lightest discipline is when some physical punishment (often wrongly thought synonymous with discipline) can be most effective. But from about age two to age six or seven a child may, for example, need physical punishment for breaking safety rules to understand the seriousness of a busy street.

Because a child at this age is free from academic learning and practical responsibilities, he or she can use that freedom to think of Krsna's qualities and pastimes. The child's main business is

to prepare the foundation for his life. He has forgotten his past lives and activities and now identifies with his present body. But the mystery of the material creation is that the world is meant simultaneously for bondage and liberation. So the same forgetfulness that allows the derelict to forget his former life as a king also gives an ideal opportunity for a child to forget material desires altogether. Prabhupada tells us that the ignorance, or innocence, of a child allows the child to easily accept *any* training. So if an innocent child is properly trained from the beginning of life to love God, that love will never deteriorate into lust.

And for the baby or toddler to love Krsna is so easy! The tiny child loves to see Krsna's picture, hear stories of His activities, and discuss simple philosophy.

Gathering Building Materials (Ages Five Through Ten)

Training is the keystone of ages five to ten, when children traditionally get their primary education, in the Vedic system at the school known as *gurukula*. During these years, Canakya tells us, we should put aside physical punishment but gradually increase discipline. When children don't fulfill their responsibilities, they should certainly suffer the consequences, which may involve physical discomforts or deprivations, such as standing in a corner for a few minutes or missing some play time. But now the child can understand that good and bad reactions are natural results of his own decisions, rather than punishments or rewards authorities impose on him.

Now in school, the child is forming lifelong habits and points of view. The child's life should be so ordered that he or she won't even think of waking late, being dirty or rude, or failing to worship and hear about Krsna. A child should feel that doing everything for Krsna, in a life full of goodness, is an essential and valuable piece of existence.

How does the child benefit from this order? It becomes a basic material for the life the child will build. Unlike a house builder, the child cannot fully know the end product. Parents and teachers, therefore, must carefully choose what examples and facts they show the elementary-school child. And a child at this age can learn an amazing amount of information! This is the age for memorizing and investigating.

Children between the ages of five and ten often seem to have a comprehensive philosophical understanding. But generally they are simply repeating stories, analogies, or explanations they have memorized.

Building the Structure (Ages Ten Through Sixteen)

Canakya advises the strictest discipline for children ages ten through sixteen. Srila Prabhupada calls this period the turning point of life, the most critical time. Now the child should be held greatly accountable for his work, words, and behavior. Prabhupada instructs us not to spoil young people with our Western ideas of freedom. We give a young person responsibility for completing schoolwork and duties on time, but we do not give him or her the freedom to

make serious moral mistakes that can have a lifetime of miserable consequences. For example, at age ten, if at all possible, boys and girls should be taught separately. If that's not practical, then at least contact between boys and girls should be minimized. And they should understand the importance of separating the sexes.

The adolescent moves from memorization to synthesis. Not that a twelve-year-old has stopped taking in new information, but he or she is most concerned with evaluating the materials acquired in childhood and fitting them together to see if an integrated view of reality emerges. Adolescents often have difficulty knowing how facts, ideals, morals, a way of life, and understanding God fit together sensibly. Prabhupada tells us, therefore, that this stage of development demands regular detailed study of philosophy and its application. An intensive course in the *Bhagavad-gita*, the study of logic, and looking at the world through spiritual vision are some means by which parents and teachers can help their growing children understand an integrated world view.

Moving In (Age Sixteen and Beyond)

At age sixteen, when our children have learned self-control and self-discipline, we can gradually treat our children as friends. The young adult, with the help of a disciplined life and adult guidance, has taken the prepared ground, the foundation, and the building materials of childhood to build a structure of meaning and function. The young adult can now move in and use his building in his own way—he can see his place in relationship to Krsna and Krsna's creation.

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 school for children aged 5-18. She is the main author/compiler of Vaikuntha Children, a gurukula classroom guidebook.