

## *"Your Children Are ... Different"*

*by Urmila Devi Dasi*

I RECENTLY TOOK my children and some of my teenage students with me to an education conference, where we met with Dave Marks, a textbook author and retired teacher with more than thirty years of experience in public and private schools. He has written a text we use as part of our English instruction. Soon after the conference, he wrote me this letter: "What a nice surprise to meet some of your students.... I would like you to pass on the feelings I have about meeting them. They were not at all like the students I have been used to meeting. Your kids were pleasant, bright, enthusiastic and happy. Whatever you are doing to or for them sure is working. Please tell them how pleased I was to meet them and what a good feeling to know that I may have had even a very small part in their education."

I recalled when my son was three years old and I brought him and his friend into a museum in Philadelphia to use the lavatory before a festival began. "I've never seen children like that!" the guard said when I asked for directions. "What do you feed them? They're so bright!"

Yes, our children are different. By their character, behavior, and bright faces, Prabhupada wanted them to stand clearly apart from ordinary materialists. He referred to children raised in Krsna consciousness as "Vaikuntha children," children free from anxiety, as if they carry within themselves the spiritual world.

Krsna conscious children are different by virtue of practical aspects of their upbringing. They don't go to movies, watch television, read romance novels, visit amusement parks, eat food not offered to Krsna, or tune into the latest musicians. Instead they read the words of saints and sages, tune into Vedic mantras, and pass time with the plots of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. These children have spiritual knowledge that illumines everything, like the sun in the day, and that enlightenment is visible in their external demeanor.

Although this special, "unworldly" quality is the *goal* of Krsna conscious child training, we may sometimes worry that our children will be *too* different—weird. How will they relate to ordinary people? When these kids turn into adults, will they be able to buy a plane ticket? Could a Krsna conscious child grow up to work as a doctor?

Two years ago my sister visited America from her overseas home. To see her, many of my cousins gathered at my mother's house in New York. My children sat with their children, many of whom they'd never met, and played and talked for several hours. One cousin pulled me aside. "Our children can get along together!" she whispered.

"Are you surprised?" I asked.

"Well, yes. I mean, I thought, well, that your children would be too 'different.' But they're very nice, happy kids."

I smiled.

We certainly teach our children (and ourselves) to avoid intimate dealing with materialistic people who will distract us from spiritual life. Our children learn to do everything—games, chores, schoolwork, conversation—in the service of Lord Krsna. But as these children advance in awareness of how everything is connected with Krsna, they do not become sectarian or self-righteous. Nor do they become materially inept or incompetent.

The more a child becomes Krsna conscious, the more clearly he or she sees others with love, compassion, and humility. A child who is factually progressing in realization of Krsna becomes a true friend of all living beings. So it isn't difficult for such a child to show this universal friendship in practical, ordinary dealings. Nondevotees then find the children to be both different and accessible, saintly yet human.

As for material knowledge and skills, our children learn how to use this world in Krsna's service. Naturally they must learn how to read maps, buy airline tickets, drive cars, and have a means of livelihood. Krsna never teaches laziness; He teaches that everyone must have a duty, because no one can even maintain his physical body without work. If a devotee lacks some material skill, Krsna will provide for that lack. One who worships the Lord with love does not lose the results of ordinary material work, nor the results of philosophical knowledge. Indeed, we see in our children that having Krsna consciousness is like having a million dollars. When you have a million, all of your ten-dollar problems are solved.

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