

Your Kids And the One-Eyed Guru

by Urmila Devi dasi

When our oldest son, Madhava, now eighteen, was small, he had few toys—some blocks, some clay. We never had a television or a video player, so he played with his toys in imitation of what he saw—worship of Krsna, chanting of His names, initiation ceremonies, bathing of the Deity. Today, having grown up without television, he has transformed his childhood play into adult service to the Lord.

In the *Srimad-Bhagavatam* (2.3.15) Prabhupada describes the benefit of growing up in a family of devotees:

By the grace of Lord Sri Krsna, we had the chance of being born in a Vaisnava family, and in our childhood we imitated the worship of Lord Krsna by imitating our father. Our father encouraged us in all respects to observe all functions such as the Ratha-yatra and Dola-yatra ceremonies, and he used to spend money liberally for distributing prasada to us children and our friends. Our spiritual master, who also took his birth in a Vaisnava family, got all inspirations from his great Vaisnava father, Thakura Bhaktivinoda. That is the way of all lucky Vaisnava families. The celebrated Mira Bai was a staunch devotee of Lord Krsna as the great lifter of Govardhana Hill.

The life history of many such devotees is almost the same because there is always symmetry between the early lives of all great devotees of the Lord. According to Jiva Gosvami, Maharaja Pariksit must have heard about the childhood pastimes of Lord Krsna at Vrndavana, for he used to imitate the pastimes with his young playmates. According to Sridhara Svami, Maharaja Pariksit used to imitate the worship of the family Deity by elderly members.

What We See and Think Of, We Become

Maharaja Pariksit heard the pastimes of Krsna and imitated them. Our son saw the worship of Krsna and imitated that. These activities transform one's consciousness from matter to spirit. Children should see Krsna and hear about Him, because they'll become what they see, hear, and think about. Krsna explains this in the *Bhagavad-gita* (8.6): "Whatever state of being one remembers when he quits his body, O son of Kunti, that state he will attain without fail." Prabhupada comments:

A person who at the end of his life quits his body thinking of Krsna attains the transcendental nature of the Supreme Lord, but it is not true that a person who thinks of something other than Krsna attains the same transcendental state. This is a point we should note very carefully.... Maharaja Bharata, although a great personality, thought of a deer at the end of his life, and so in his next life he was transferred

into the body of a deer.... Of course, one's thoughts during the course of one's life accumulate to influence one's thoughts at the moment of death, so this life creates one's next life.

Television's ideas, sounds, and images are not of Krsna. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Jerry Mander writes:

When you are watching TV, ... you have opened your mind, and someone else's daydreams have entered.... Your mind is the screen for their microwave pictures. Once their images are inside you, they imprint upon your memory. They become yours.... What's more, the images remain in you permanently.... Please bring to mind any of the following: John F. Kennedy, Milton Berle, Captain Kangaroo, Captain Kirk, Henry Kissinger. Were you able to make a picture of them in your head? ... Now would you make the effort, please, to erase these TV people from your mind? Make them go away. Erase Johnny Carson or Henry Kissinger.... Once television places an image inside your head, it is yours forever.

Just as children absorbed in spiritual images imitate them, children absorbed in television images imitate those images. Mander writes, "Children's games are largely based on their experiences. If they live in the country, their games will involve animals. If they go to movies, their games will reflect that. If they watch television, you can see it in their games. In all cases, the characters and creatures they are imitating are based upon the pictures of them which they carry in their minds."

We must ask whether we want our children to become like a television character, or like Krsna. Do we want them to attain the spiritual world after death, or take a body according to their television-influenced thoughts?

Association with Passion and Ignorance

Quoting the Vedic scripture *Hari-bhakti-sudhodaya*, Srila Prabhupada writes, "Association is very important. It acts just like a crystal stone, which will reflect anything which is put before it." And in commenting on the importance of proper association for one wishing to attain ecstatic love for Krsna, Prabhupada writes, "It is essential, therefore, that one constantly associate with pure devotees who are engaged morning and evening in chanting the Hare Krsna *mantra*. In this way one will get the chance to purify his heart and develop this ecstatic pure love for Krsna." He also writes that one should strictly avoid association with persons not interested in Krsna consciousness. Unfortunately, television means association not with saintly people but with those in the darkness of passion and ignorance. In *The Big Book of Home Learning*, author Mary Pride writes that TV may keep kids off the street corners, but "it also brings the street corners into our living rooms." Children between the ages of three and seventeen see an average of eighteen thousand acts of violence. According to Jim Trelease, author of *Read-Aloud Handbook*, you would have to see all thirty-seven of Shakespeare's plays to see as many acts of human violence (fifty-four) as you would see in just three evenings of prime-time television.

Prabhupada spoke of this violence, in Los Angeles on June 26, 1975, in the following conversation:

Prabhupada: Dog and television and whiskey and cigarette. That's all. [*Laughter.*] Is it not? ... In India these things are entering—dog, television. Cigarettes and wine have already entered.

Disciple: This is the degradation.

Prabhupada: Ah, yes.

Disciple: So much sex—everything you watch.

Prabhupada: And not only that—horrible scenes.

Disciple: Yes.

Prabhupada: Killing and like that.

Children are affected by this violence. Marie Winn writes in *The Plug-in Drug*:

There is no doubt that the children involved in serious crimes today are not normal. Their histories reveal without exception a background of poverty, degradation, neglect, scholastic failure, frustration, and heavy television viewing. But while poverty and family pathology did not appear for the first time in American society in the decades between 1952 and 1972, a frightening new breed of juvenile offender did. "It is as though our society had bred a new genetic strain," writes a reporter in *The New York Times*, "the child-murderer who feels no remorse and is scarcely conscious of his acts...." The problem is not that they learn how to commit violence from watching violence on television (although perhaps they sometimes do), but that television conditions them to deal with real people as if they were on a television screen.

The ultimate violence of television goes beyond desensitizing children to cruelty. It also goes beyond the violence TV often ignites in viewers, regardless of program content. The ultimate violence of television is that it encourages a sensual, materialistic life of acquiring and consuming. Companies spend millions or billions of dollars for TV advertising because it's effective. Not only are the advertisements effective in producing a materialistic mentality in viewers, but the shows themselves must appeal to the advertisers. Otherwise, a network or local station can't afford to produce the program. Most programming, therefore, is designed to attract and produce the type of person who will be influenced by the advertisements. This is the real violence. As Prabhupada writes, "To train the innocent boy to be a sense gratifier at the early age when the child is actually happy in any circumstance is the greatest violence."

Therefore, in *The Nectar of Instruction* Prabhupada writes that intelligent persons interested in Krsna consciousness should never take part in such activities as watching television.

Television as Intoxication

It is bad enough that the content of most television shows is firmly in passion and ignorance, filling our children's consciousness with images and desires in these lower modes of nature. But there is also ample evidence that the act of watching television is itself a type of intoxication, firmly in the mode of ignorance. "TV is a drug," wrote Eleanor Randolph in an article in *The Detroit Free Press* (May 9, 1990). "Like other addictions, such as cigarettes, booze ... and drugs, television may be something else in our society that feels good for the moment, but only makes things worse.... If someone tunes in to relieve loneliness, they will feel even lonelier when they tune out."

Television viewers can even suffer visual-motor conflicts similar to those experienced by drug users.

In "Crack and the Box," an article in *Esquire Magazine* (May 1990), Pete Hamill wrote, "Television, like drugs, dominates the lives of its addicts.... One third of a group of four- and five-year-olds would rather give up their daddy than television. Given a similar choice (between cocaine or heroin and father, mother, brother, sister, wife, husband, children, job), almost every junkie would do the same."

In a 1990 article in *The Detroit News*, Anne Roark wrote:

Television is more likely than any other leisure activity to leave people passive, tense and unable to concentrate.... The longer people watch, the less able they are to concentrate. They become increasingly drowsy and bored. As time goes on, they grow sadder, lonelier, more irritable and more hostile. Although it is true people are relaxed while the television set is on, when they turn it off, they are even less relaxed than before they began to watch.

Also, the content and nature of the shows and commercials may predispose children to take shelter of chemical intoxication to solve life's problems. After all, TV trains its viewers to change their mood by the turn of a dial. In *Read-Aloud Handbook*, Jim Trelease comments, "It is implicit in every one of television's commercials that there is no problem which cannot be solved by simple artificial means. Whether the problem is anxiety or common diarrhea, nervous tension or the common cold, a simple tablet or spray solves the problem.... Instead of thinking through our problems, television promotes the easy way. The cumulative effect of such thinking is enormous when you consider that between ages 1 and 17 the average child is exposed to 350,000 commercials promoting simple solutions to problems."

Srila Prabhupada once put it succinctly: "If we do not become hypnotized by Krsna, then we must be hypnotized by this television."

In his book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Roald Dahl writes:

We've watched them gaping at the screen,
They loll and slip and lounge about,
And stare until their eyes pop out.
(Last week in someone's place we saw
A dozen eyeballs on the floor.)
They sit and stare and stare and sit
Until they're hypnotized by it,
Until they're absolutely drunk
With all that shocking ghastly junk.

Educational Television?

Television shows or videos can sometimes be a valuable adjunct to an educational program. From an in-depth study of the effects of TV and many years of experience using video in a classroom, I have found that TV and video can have their place when used with great care. Generally, if children have already studied a subject by reading about it, writing about it, and discussing it, a video can supplement and enhance their education in ways that are difficult to duplicate. But merely watching an "educational" video or TV show about, for example, the desert in Southern California has little or no value. And too much time spent watching any form of television or video is time lost from the way children learn best—by seeing, hearing, and practicing. Nearly every study I've seen on the relationship between television and children emphasizes that television is most likely to harm, and least likely to educate, young children. A good guideline is that a child under five years of age should watch no more than one or two hours a week of educational video or television.

In fact, programs designed to educate young children have proven to have the opposite effect. In *Sesame Street Revisited*, the New York Russell Sage Foundation writes, "The American program 'Sesame Street' was specially designed to help disadvantaged pre-school children catch up cognitively and verbally with those from more fortunate backgrounds. A 1975 survey suggests that 'Sesame Street' widened the achievement gap, and that light viewers exhibited more gains in learning than heavy viewers."

Marie Winn writes in *The Plug-in Drug*, "Poor children have not caught up with their more advantaged peers, or even made significant gains of any sort, though they watch 'Sesame Street' faithfully year after year. Schools have not had to re-adjust their first-grade curricula to accommodate a new breed of well-prepared, 'Sesame Street'-wise children with higher levels of language maturity.... Their language skills do not show any significant or permanent gains as they progress through school."

My own experience as a teacher bears this out. I could always tell the children who had watched much so-called educational television. They were less responsive to teaching, had a shorter attention span, were less interested in learning to read, and had a difficult time adjusting to any disciplined learning.

It is far better to prepare a child for school by reading to him and letting him see you read. "Compared to reading, television is still the more passive of the two activities," says Jim Trelease in *Read-Aloud Handbook*. "In reading, educators point out, a child must actively use a variety of skills involving sounds, spelling rules, blendings, as well as constructing mental images of the scene described in the book. Television requires no such mental activity."

Can videos be used for spiritual education? We have a large and growing library of Krsna conscious videos available for our children. Yet even these should be used only rarely, especially when children are very young. Prabhupada wanted our young children to play games about Krsna, running and jumping outside. As they mature, our children should spend the bulk of their time chanting Hare Krsna, going to school, or doing some practical service. Certainly entertainment centered on Krsna and His incarnations was an important feature of Vedic life. But the average child today watches six or seven hours of television daily. Is there any history of a society that entertained its children for seven hours a day?

Parental Control—Can't or Won't

In *The Big Book of Home Learning*, Mary Pride writes, "Do you really want to know how it is that some mothers of seven can find time to write books or make patchwork quilts or run Bed and Breakfast operations while other mothers of one don't even get around to making the bed? Those who can, do. Those who watch TV (more than 15 minutes or so a day), can't."

An article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Feb. 2, 1975) said about such parents: "There is an immediate remedy available that does not seem to have occurred to them—turn off the set."

Is it that we can't throw away our TV, or that we don't really want to? We can stop our children from running in the street or playing with kitchen knives—why not from watching TV? Are we so attached to the box as a babysitter that we have no concern about its material and spiritual effects on our children? The *Srimad-Bhagavatam* states that one should not become a parent unless he can liberate his children from the material world. The price of life without TV seems a small one to pay.

More advice from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*:

The most important thing we've learned,
So far as children are concerned,
Is never, NEVER, NEVER let
Them near your television set—
Or better still, just don't install
The idiotic thing at all.

Children Without TV?

In 1987, several parents at one of our ISKCON centers in England met to discuss the problem of television. Madhavi Devi Dasi related how, when her children were very young, they were satisfied with a small variety of Krsna conscious videos. As time went by they wanted more

and more variety. Gradually it got out of hand as she let them fill in with materialistic programs. In desperation she got rid of the TV, apprehensive of how the children would react. To her surprise, they never seemed to miss it and have rarely asked for it.

Children can play. They can read. They can garden. They can learn useful crafts. They can worship the household Deity.

So please, oh please, we beg, we pray,
Go throw your TV set away,
And in its place you can install
A lovely bookshelf on the wall.

As the children get a higher taste for Krsna conscious engagement, they will have no interest in watching mundane movies or television. We want them to come to the standard that Srila Prabhupada set in his personal life, as he relates in the following story:

"There was an incident in my life. I was, of course, at that time a householder. So one friend was going to the cinema with his family, and he saw me. I was in the street, and he stopped his car and asked me, 'Come. We are going to cinema.' So I refused, 'If you give me one thousand dollars, still I shall not go to the cinema.' So he dragged me. He took me to the cinema house, but I never entered. I came back. You see? Because it was detestful."

Another time Prabhupada said, "The sign of a devotee is that the devotee is no more interested with material enjoyment. So these young boys and girls, they do not go to cinema. Why? They don't want this! ... They don't want this material happiness. ... That is the test. When one becomes detestful of material enjoyment, you will know—or he'll know, personally, how much he is advanced in spiritual life."

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