

Schooling Krsna's Children

What's a Child to Read?

by Sri Rama Dasa

PARENTS OFTEN WRITE and ask for advice about reading material for their children. They want to expose their children to as much Krsna consciousness as possible (and limit their exposure to materialism), but run into several practical problems, especially: (1) there is a shortage of good Krsna conscious books for children, and (2) many kids will read almost anything they can get their hands on.

So parents wonder what they can do to see that their children's reading fosters Krsna consciousness. How can we exercise reasonable guidance without being oppressive? And, perhaps more important, how can we teach children discrimination when they read?

By discrimination I mean looking into something deeply enough to understand how it will influence one's thinking and life. I mean going beyond the superficial mindset modern society conditions us to—a mindset in which most problems can be solved within the thirty minutes of an average television show, in which buying toys can give one true satisfaction, in which there's no clear right and wrong, no one knows the Absolute Truth, and where the best we can do is come up with our own reality.

Since most of our children are exposed hundreds of times a day to the full force of corporate marketing and political/social propaganda, gross and subtle, we must teach them how to discriminate beyond the superficial and oversimplified.

The first step toward insuring that your kid reads acceptable books is this: before you give your child a book, read it yourself. Too often I've seen parents and teachers turn children loose in the library to select whatever appeals to them, not realizing that many innocent-looking books subvert the values they're trying to teach them at home or in school.

Here are a few points to consider when evaluating a book:

1. Theme. Stories are meant to be enjoyable. But most stories also teach something, even though the author may not directly say what it is. The plot, characters, conflicts, and outcome usually support one main idea, often philosophical or moral. This theme is the essence of a book. Parents should ascertain whether or not a book's theme is compatible with a God-centered, Krsna conscious view of life.

2. Heroes. Children naturally identify with the heroes or main characters of a story. When you look at a book, ask yourself: will you be satisfied seeing your children grow up emulating the qualities of those characters? You'll rarely find characters who closely resemble devotees. But at least you can look for those who demonstrate good moral behavior, appreciation for God and His representatives, respect for authority, and so on.

3. Morality. The best we can expect from many books is that they will teach children to behave morally. Look for books that show a clear sense of right and wrong, ultimately having its roots in the laws of God. Avoid books that push "situation ethics," where there is no

absolute right and wrong and everyone must come up with his or her own standards of morality for every situation.

4. Good and evil. In the Vedic conception of drama, a work should have a happy ending where good is rewarded and evil punished. This leaves the reader with a sense of satisfaction and a feeling of faith in the purpose of life. Books without happy endings often leave children feeling empty, wondering if there is any order and justice in life.

5. Wisdom. Does the book show respect for knowledge and wisdom? Does it treat spiritually-minded characters favorably, or as "naive sentimentalists"?

6. View of God. Does the author present God as impersonal, either directly or indirectly? Does he or she hint that perhaps God is not there—or that if He is, He has no influence on the world's affairs? Does the book equate service to man with service to God? We need books that do better than that.

7. View of Religion. What is the author's attitude toward religion? Writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often portrayed religion unfavorably. They were struggling to expose religious institutions that were rife with corruption and foolishness, and sentimental followers who allowed themselves to be exploited in the name of spirituality.

8. Humanism. Humanism pervades modern society. It is so much a part of Western education that we may not recognize it, even when it's blatant.

Roughly, humanism means faith that the intellect of man is sufficient to solve all problems for the individual and society. Man can achieve anything he puts his mind and efforts to. Humanism exalts man's supposed superiority over nature and the irrelevance of God's will and influence. It makes man the measure of all things.

If a book pushes humanism, avoid it.

In summary, the main question should be, "What benefit will my child get from reading this book?" Does it emphasize spiritual values or give good moral guidance? Is it well-written literature? Does it offer useful information or ideas? Does it reinforce Krsna conscious principles or values?

Schools should take the evaluation process one step further. As mentioned above, we must teach our children to evaluate books themselves—to look beyond the surface and judge for themselves the value of what they read, hear, and watch.