

Child Abuse - Definitions and Subjectivity

By Bhakti Vikasa Swami

What exactly does “child abuse” mean? Different people will have different ideas, possibly completely opposed. Of course, there is unlikely to be disagreement about its more egregious forms. But some behaviors toward children are less clear—some would define them as abuse, others would not. For example, one person might consider a child’s ear being tweaked as an offense so bad that it should be internationally publicized. Whereas someone else might think that some measure of corporal punishment can be actually beneficial for children.

Today’s world is beset by many “hot” issues on which opinions diverge widely and acrimoniously, and concerning which no middle ground has been reached even after many years of back and forth—and probably never will be. Such issues include abortion, the existence of God, the ordination of women and homosexuals as priests, and so on. It seems that, within ISKCON, child abuse is a similar issue. For while some people are horrified by ear-tweaking, others see their horror to be ridiculous.

Also, opinions can change—as did mine regarding corporal punishment. I was completely opposed to it, based on some well-circulated quotes of Srila Prabhupada’s. My stance changed on becoming aware of several other quotes wherein Srila Prabhupada expresses approval of stringent corporal punishment. Somehow, in discussions about child abuse within ISKCON, these quotes never seem to be cited.

He’s not envious. He cannot be envious. The killing of the demons, that is also His affection. Just like sometimes we punish our children; we give a very strong slap. (From Srila Prabhupada’s lecture on Srimad-Bhagavatam 1.8.29 -- April 21, 1973, Los Angeles)

If you want to train your children, sometimes you have to slap, you have to chastise for his benefit. (From Çréla Prabhupāda’s lecture on Srimad-Bhagavatam 5.5.2 -- April 12, 1975, Hyderabad)

In a conversation on 5 November 1976, in Vrndavana, the topic arose of one particularly badly-behaved boy.

Rupa-vilasa: Bhavananda told me he did not want to see that boy again.

Pradyumna: In Mayapur he had some girl...

Jagadisa: In my opinion, the best thing is to make an example and beat him.

Prabhupada: Yes, send him to farm, work in the field. If he does not work, beat him. Murkhasya lathyausadhīh. [“The medicine for a fool is a stick.”]

[Hindi conversation with Bhagatji, with translation by BVKS:

Bhagatji: ek baat yaad aa gayi. /Something I recall.

Prabhupada: Eh?

Bhagatji: Pehle log jo hai, pehle jo kuch crime karte the, to phasi

ya kala-pani. Kala-pani me singapore ki taraf malaya bhej dete the.

Aap unko Hyderabad bhej rahe hai. /Previously, criminals were hanged or exiled by being sent to kala-pani (nickname of a prison in the Andamans) in Malaya, in the direction of Singapore. You are sending them to Hyderabad.

Prabhupada: Ha! Hyderabad bhejo, usko kaam karao. Usko matti khodne ka

kaam do; nahi kare to usko pito, aise kiya jaaye. /Yes. Send him to (the ISKCON farm at) Hyderabad, make him work. Give him digging work. If he refuses, thrash him, that is the way to do it.] [“pito” means “severely beat”]

Yasodanandana: He was just in Hyderabad for that ceremony there, and he caused such disruption in the whole temple that I don't think they'd want him there.

Jagadisa: The thing is, if we beat him here and keep him here, then all the boys will straighten up because they will see that if they go bad, then this will be their punishment.

Prabhupada: As you think, you can do. But I wanted to engage in farm work, in digging.

To clarify my present position on corporal punishment in ISKCON gurukulas: I generally do not recommend it, although in some form it might sometimes be employed. If a child regularly severely misbehaves, and the teachers cannot reform him (due to lack of expertise on their part, or intransigence on the part of the child), then some changes need to be made for the benefit of all concerned. Such changes might include involving more devotees to monitor and counsel the teacher or child, or even removing the teacher or the child or both from the school.

Much more to be said. More to follow, gradually.