

## Reflections of a Gurukula Teacher

Via private correspondence

Almost all of the gurukula alumni I've spoken with regretted their experience. This raises the question: "can a spiritual boarding school for young children be successful?" What would it entail? What should be different?

Hindsight is always better and experience is extremely valuable. Therefore, while writing the section of the book about abuse in the gurukulas I wrote to a devotee who had experience teaching in the early days, asking for their thoughts on the matter, from this point in time, now decades later. Here is the reply, edited to obscure their identity.

Regarding gurukula, I've had many thoughts about it over the years. Mostly regrets. I served at the gurukula for several years. During the time I was there, we struggled with how to provide a devotional structure while teaching and disciplining the children.

Out of scores of children, there were a few, maybe three or four, who were clearly disturbed. They either had been given drugs or had a genetic mental problem. But because Prabhupada told us we should accept all children, we didn't send them back. That was a mistake, and it added considerably to our problems in managing the children. I've since reinterpreted Prabhupada's acceptance of all children to be in relation to their ability to pay and not necessarily concerning their behavior.

It took me nearly three years of attempting to teach and care for the children to develop some experience and solid views. I think the most important advice is something Prabhupada said in Dallas. A devotee asked him about disciplining the children. He said (and I'm paraphrasing) that structure is needed but it must be based on love or affection.

So, after contemplating this fairly often for the forty years since, my strong belief is that children (and adults) can do austerities if they love their teacher, parent, or leader. Thus, the authorities have the responsibility to communicate that love and base the structure or discipline on that affection.

This is a difficult job to do. It requires experience, artfulness, and genuine affection on the part of the leader, teacher, or parent. Personal charisma can be useful, but that's another topic.

I think that in such an environment, it is never necessary to strike a child. It is possible to control and discipline children with care, affection, structure, and gravity.

If one cannot control children after establishing such an environment, then one should either try harder, or send the problem child or children back home.

I also believe in the concept that it takes a village to raise a child. Thus, to have a school that is isolated from the householder community is not ideal. Moreover, where the family community is not mature and well-established, the school will likely reflect that.

In the broader Vaishnava society, I think that families should be highly valued. Young men and women should be trained to be householders as much as they are trained to be brahmacaris. Families should be the backbone of the Sankirtan movement, and they should be at the forefront in every way. Over emphasis on monasticism is not the message of the Gita, which was delivered to a householder. With strong, responsible families come strong communities and schools. And attractive preaching.

Finally, the question of abuse. I feel there must be strict monitoring. Individuals who abuse children must be punished accordingly. I believe in corporal punishment for adult offenders, but where that is not a part of the law, they should be turned over to the police and judicial system.

Also, where there is a pattern of abuse in a school, its authorities should be censured and the school should be closed.

Abuse is always a potential problem in boarding schools. Every boarding school that I've ever heard of has had such problems--from the finest schools in England that cater to the upper classes to the finest gurukulas in India. If any organization

is to have boarding schools, there must be systems to address this problem. Otherwise, the schools should be closed.

I have many other experiences and opinions, but again, I've not sought to express them, nor do I have a desire to do so. My opinions here focus on discipline and abuse, which are always issues. But I have ideas about curriculum and structure based on association with Prabhupada along with my own contemplation over the years.

Regarding your question about negative and positive reactions, I have had positive reactions from both students and teachers. Someone told me within the past 2-3 years that I did a great job. Some devotees still regard me with fondness based their experience with me from that time.