

Vedanta for Kids

This came yesterday (c. 2011) from Michael:

Are there any Gurukulam “approved” Vedantic materials for children? A brief Google search doesn't give much to go on AND a little too much of what I see is associated with Sri Ramakrishna & Vivekananda, neither of whom I've ever managed to “resonate” with. I have a niece who is about to turn 2, and a nephew who is now 6.

Thoughts?

I can hear Kendrick telling me that I probably wouldn't be fully satisfied unless I developed them myself. Devil!

I sure love being a part of the class,
Thanks so much to you and Deb for being glorious hosts
and patient guides.

Namaste,
Michael

My short answer to Michael was “No, there aren't any.” I have added a longer answer below, and am sharing it with everyone because this is a worthy subject for discussion. Why not weigh in on it yourself? I know there is much more that could be said.

The adult/child polarity is one we have covered occasionally here and there in class, but it should be recognized as one of the most essential dualities of all, and thus a fitting paradox for yogic resolution. Several of the class members have significantly improved their relationship with their children after adopting a unitive attitude. I can't think of anything that has a greater import for our world.

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I was raised agnostic, and am extremely grateful for it. Not that I didn't have a strong moral education, I most certainly did; only there were no religious compulsions and threats of hellfire to cope with. Mostly my Sundays were free for play, play, play, which is the real "church" for kids! Vedanta is not a religion—or shouldn't be—but it does cover the same, mostly adult, territory.

The best thing for newcomers to life is to have a lot of love. They need a trusting, supportive, safe environment to explore through play and daydreaming for as long as possible, and from that solid ground they gradually grow strong enough to cope with flavors that are less than sweet: the sour, salty and bitter tastes of the world outside the family womb. Kids who are old enough can begin to learn that all is not sweetness and light in their world, but it should never be brought in too early in their development if it can be helped. Start with the sweetness, then add the rest gingerly. Instruction for the young should be gentle and positive. Unfortunately, it is often brutal and fear-based, with adults convinced by tradition that the harshness is "for their own good." That's a highly debatable proposition, to say the least.

While Vedanta can help us learn to relate to everyone, including kids, on an appropriate level, Vedanta itself is mainly suitable for adults who have outgrown their youthful need to cling to fantasies and simplistic answers, which do serve a purpose for the very young.

The age that a thirst for spiritual truth kicks in can vary from the early teens to old age to never, depending on several factors, including how much the psyche has been terrorized in its tender years. It appears sporadically in small children as a desire for justice and fair play, which does manifest very early. Most commonly it is precipitated by the so-called midlife crisis, which is the age when a person begins to realize they have been sleepwalking through an imaginary substitute for whatever reality

might actually be. Early on we learn to acquiesce to others and build defenses, and only later does a drive to express our innate abilities pressure us to emerge from our shell. When we begin to throw off socially supplied beliefs and look around on our own, intelligent philosophies can serve us well. Prior to that time, beliefs mainly—but not entirely—add to the crust of oppressive dogmatism that will have to be broken through later by a spiritual struggle.

Because of this, I advocate that religion should be officially X rated, meaning no one under 18 admitted. But I'm a liberal, and am not opposed to the under-aged sneaking in to a place of worship (just like a movie theater) if they are curious enough. Philosophy and morality should be doled out in small doses and be as open-ended as possible, with no whiff of institutionalism. Passing on wisdom at its best is a direct heart-to-heart matter.

The Gurukula has published a book entitled *Children's Narayana Guru*, guaranteed to baffle even the most precocious child. It actually has some merit, but it mixes a tone of addressing very small children with ideas suitable for teenagers. It might possibly serve as a basis for an oral story that could be told to a child, leaving out the complexities and digressions. In writing for kids it's good to have spent a lot of time listening to them (which is not the same as instructing or managing them) in order to understand their needs and mode of thinking, so sannyasins should be automatically disqualified unless they have a special flair for that type of communication.

I well remember Penelope, pregnant at the first Portland Gurukula, crooning how she would never read fairy tales to her children; she would only read them scriptures so they would grow up to be soooo spiritual. Debbie Twombly was shocked to hear her, and angrily told me, "I will never read anything *but* fairy tales to *my* kids!" Notwithstanding the fuzzy line between fairy tales and scriptures, I had to agree with Debbie. The sense of wonder, awe and excitement are what motivate kids, and nothing stifles their imagination better than preaching coupled with incomprehensible

mountains of verbiage. Most scriptures should receive the X rating also, in my book.

All sorts of wild tales are fine for kids: scientific, mythical, fiction, nonfiction, even religious. Our daughter Emily loved the Indian comic books we picked up there, with vivid depictions of the wonder tales of the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Gods and goddesses riding golden chariots through the sky and shooting flaming arrows at evil demons, plenty of cartoon bloodshed, but most importantly the triumph of good over evil. Very satisfying to children. Tales like these inflame the imagination, and we never pretended to Emily that they were “real” in any ordinary sense. But they are explosively imaginative, and stimulating. Since they are full of terrible events and barbaric morality, there were times when we had to talk about their faults with her. Myths of other cultures can be even more deranged, filled with injustice and cruelty, none more so than the beloved Bible. What we shared with our kids was that, in spite of widespread superstition, there is no evil deity anywhere to pass judgment on their innocence. We did everything in our power to nurture our kids’ innocence rather than suppress it, as paranoid parents are wont to do.

I can’t even bear to think about modern movies and video games, with their casual and extreme violence, vividly thrusting the lowest human values straight into the subconscious. These have to be causing serious mental problems in children, bequeathing them a lifelong burden of pain in exchange for momentary pleasures. There is no better advertisement for books and homemade amusements than those highly popular and soul killing consumer products. They need an X rating even more than religion does!

Kids do have an amazing capacity to process whatever they are exposed to, especially when they can discuss it with a sane adult. If you are sensitive to any child, you find they are all unique and have their own needs in communication. Their capacity for abstract thinking begins at zero in the first year or two and slowly grows as long as their curiosity persists. Meanwhile, they are in an

alpha state for many years, which means they are essentially “stoned” for perhaps six to ten years. You have to be really careful what you say to a stoned person, because they are likely to believe it much more than they should. Words go very deep into their psyches, and images pack an even greater wallop.

The best way of all to nurture the budding wisdom of children is to be available to talk with them when they have questions. Always encourage questions! And be interested in them. Play with them. Treat them as equals. They love it when adults honor them as the immense beings they know themselves to be, and don't treat them like dumb brutes. If you ask what they are thinking or doing, they will be delighted and happy to tell you, and if they aren't there is something amiss. There is no need to supply them with absolute answers unless it's a matter of life and death. Monolithic opinions are repulsive to secure children, though in small doses they do sometimes help with insecurity. Absolutism and the Absolute are in fact diametrically opposed. The Absolute is perfectly flexible while absolutism is utterly rigid. So share your own flexibility and openness as your own legacy to the next generation. And dare to be silly. It'll be good for you both.

A note in 2021: my concerns about video games mentioned above have been realized in the insane computer cults of our time: the world as a vivid hallucination about killing everyone who isn't like you, the medium utterly blurring the lines between fantasy and reality. Hold on to your hats!