

HOW THE PARENTS' UNION SCHOOL HELPS A YOUNG MOTHER.

By THE HON. MRS. LEAF.

I AM greatly honoured in being asked to speak at your Conference to-day. It is not my practice to speak to large and distinguished audiences, and the only reason I am here is to express my intense gratitude to the P.N.E.U.

I think you will all agree with me that our children are a public trust, but when we come to discuss the problem of parents teaching their own children, in early years, you may not agree with me at all. I am a biased person, having tried the experiment myself and taught my own children up to the age of eight. The measure of success attained in my home-schoolroom is due, firstly, to the keenness of the children in their work, and secondly, to the help given us by the P.U.S. and their excellent choice of books. I can prove conclusively from my own experience that children have a natural desire to learn if the right doors are opened for them.

I will now show you as clearly as I can, in the time allotted to me, the practical working of the P.U.S. in the home-schoolroom, illustrated by a few of my own experiences. I will also ask you to consider with me a few fundamental principles of education. We will end by discussing some of the difficulties and advantages of the teacher, especially if the teacher is also the mother.

What is the P.U.S.? As many of you know, the Parents' Union School is an organisation within the P.N.E.U. All who join it must become members of the P.N.E.U. and accept its principles. All over the world there are children working in the P.U.S. on the same programmes; these are sent out at the beginning of each term, with the time-tables, and short examination papers on the term's work are sent out at the end of each term. Some of the children who join the

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P.U.S. are working with their mothers, some with an English or foreign governess, others with a trained House of Education teacher; sometimes several families join together in order to share the benefit of a House of Education trained teacher, and many children work in schools that have adopted P.N.E.U. principles.

The P.U.S. is a boon to those who live abroad. I have known parents in remote parts of Canada, S. Africa and India who have been greatly helped by the P.U.S. in educating their children successfully, in early years.

My children joined the P.U.S. at the age of six—this is the earliest at which they are supposed to join and begin regular lessons, though many of the P.N.E.U. principles can be adopted as soon as they are born. It is recognised in the P.U.S. that "children are born persons." The Director of the P.U.S., at Ambleside, takes an individual interest in each child, but in order that she may know the varying characteristics of her numerous school children, she sends us a short question paper to fill in for each child as he joins. We must give details as to age, height, weight, health, favourite occupations, etc. The child has to submit to a memory test and the drawing of his hand—all these, together with specimens of work, are sent to Ambleside.

The P.U.S. has a very wide curriculum, but, as Miss Mason says, "It is not the number of subjects, but the hours of work that tire the scholar." Growing children need plenty of rest; mine are exceptionally tall for their ages, and I have been allowed to adapt their time-tables accordingly.

The first hour or two after breakfast being reserved for lessons, at least an hour is left for a good outing, and another hour for complete rest before dinner (that is while the children are under eight years old); yet all the subjects on the programme have been taken without effort, and the children learn to concentrate, as they go over nothing twice. The afternoons have been left free for games and walks, occasionally supplemented by music, dancing, or a Nature ramble. The children who work in the P.U.S. have no evening preparation, but I have often found them eager to vary their play with gardening, handicrafts, or reading; in summer their leisure hours are mostly spent out of doors.

If Education is a Life, we must begin by “establishing relations between the child and God, man and the universe.”

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How is this done in the P.U.S.?

Bible lessons from Old and New Testaments are the first subjects on the programmes. Surely it is every mother’s duty to give to her children their first knowledge of God; even if they cannot undertake to teach the other subjects, I would plead with parents to teach this all important one themselves, remembering that it needs much preparation and a broad-minded outlook. We must read widely ourselves and do not let us be tied down by narrow views that hinder our fight against the forces of evil. Among other books I have found those by Dr. Paterson Smyth very helpful in preparing these lessons; if possible, no explanation should be given to distract the child from the Bible text, till after he has narrated, except to elucidate a few difficult words, if the occasion arises. Sometimes the child illustrates the story by a brush-drawing, and I have a delightful drawing by my six-year-old of Noah’s ark, complete with dove and olive leaf.

I am glad the Old Testament is not omitted. I heard a story, a little while ago, of a mother who only taught her child the New Testament, and then, after some years, gave a large dose of Old Testament. The result drew forth the remark: “Oh, mother, God *has* improved since then.” If we insert the words, “Our conception of God . . .” the child is not far wrong, and it is through the Old Testament that we realise the gradual revelation of God to His people.

Children often teach us, their vivid imaginations help them to grasp a truth before we do. One day I had been trying rather lamely to explain what a Prophet was, after reading aloud those wonderful visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, when my little child remarked: “Just like the man on that medal, Mummy.” What could he mean? Then I remembered that at least a year previously we had been shown my grandfather’s gold medal,¹ given him by the Royal Humane Society, on which there is a figure blowing a torch to fan the flame of life. Did not the prophets of old fan the spiritual life of their people when it ebbed low?

We now pass on to the child’s relations with man, learnt through history and also through wide reading of all kinds,

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lives of saints, and of great men, tales and myths. After reading *Our Island Story* and Mrs. Frewen Lord’s books on St. Paul’s and Westminster Abbey, how thrilling it is to go and see the Tower of London and visit the tombs of our heroes. My little boy begged me to take him to the National Gallery, when we came up to London for a few days, because he wanted to see the Turner pictures which he had been studying. During the term six excellent reproductions from the work of a great master are studied and described by the child, and I find that my children

love these beautiful pictures, and they will never forget the dragon they have tried to draw, from Carpaccio's "St. George," or the lantern from Holman Hunt's "Light of the World."

Under Musical Appreciation the works of one great composer are studied each term. My children have been fortunate in being able to attend a class once a week, where they play in a little band and learn their sol-fa, combined with some eurhythmics—this is always a very happy afternoon. They have also greatly enjoyed our Cambridge Children's Concerts, where they can hear some orchestral music and learn to distinguish different instruments.

We come now to the child's relations with the universe. In the Ambleside Geography Books even tiny children learn something of the sun, moon and stars, as well as the world in which we live; by their own and their parents' travels their geography and history lessons are made real. Children soon learn to go about with open eyes and open ears, especially when they learn Natural History. Great pride is taken in the Nature Note Books, in which brush-drawings are made of flowers, fruit, animals, insects, and possibly some seashore friends.

Both parents belong to the P.N.E.U., and the father can help forward the work in the home-schoolroom by helping with his boy's handicrafts and by taking an interest in the work in hand; and it is he who hears the recitations and marks the copy books for the end of term report.

I have found *Le Livre Rouge* very good for the first lessons in French, but however familiar one may be with the language, there are often difficulties in making small children take seriously the learning of a foreign language, before they [sic] have been abroad, unless they have had the opportunity of meeting foreigners and hearing them converse.

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Children who are accustomed to narrate after one hearing only, soon acquire good powers of concentration, and when they do their sums this comes in useful, especially if another child's narration is being heard in the same room at the time. I think one of the most useful things we can teach our children is to work alone; during the arithmetic lesson (or number, as it is called in the P.U.S.), or when the child is writing or learning by heart, I often leave him in order to interview the cook, or answer the telephone, but when I return I nearly always find the work conscientiously done. My nurse was always a great stand-by on these occasions, for she was very much interested in the P.N.E.U. and often heard a narration for me. I was delighted to hear that my boy was considered "well grounded" on arrival at school, and his teacher seemed pleased to find a boy who could be trusted to work by himself. I repeat once more: "What should I have done without the P.U.S.?"

We now come to the question: "Is it a good thing for parents to teach their own children?" I think this is answered best by Miss Mason's own words (she is speaking of infants of six and under, but for the purpose of argument I will raise this age to eight): "We are waking up to our duties and, in proportion as mothers become more and more highly educated and efficient, they will doubtless feel the more strongly that the education of their children, in the first six years of life, is an undertaking hardly to be entrusted to any hands but their own, and they will take it up *as their profession*, that is, with the *diligence, regularity and punctuality* which men bestow on their professional labours."

"But," you say, "how am I, a busy housewife, to manage this?" And so we come to some of our difficulties, the chief of which are: our *lack of time* and our *own inadequacy*. "How am I to find the time?" says the social worker entangled in many committees, the golfer, the

professional woman, the society leader, the traveller, the wife of the scientist or M.P., who helps her husband in his work, or you may be an intending M.P. yourself! Most of us have to cope with domestic problems . . . and yet we all make time for the things we really care about. I have proved myself in my own small house with a small staff that it only requires a little ingenuity to re-arrange my day, adapt my household and give up a few committees, games and social functions, and yet leave time for an hour or two of great happiness, which, if one does not snatch

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now, one never will be able to make up for later in life.

You must also leave time for your own preparation. I said before that the children have no "prep." Another minor advantage of teaching your children at home is that in periods when they are in quarantine for some infectious illness, or even when they are convalescent, the course of instruction need not be interrupted entirely, and for the same reason it does not matter how much you move about, and holidays need not always be in August.

The second great difficulty is that of our own inadequacy. We must "Be Prepared" (as the Guides say). Many mothers, like myself, have not had the advantages of either a University or a P.U.S. education, but I cannot help feeling that numerous examination certificates are not more important factors in the making of a good teacher than patience. It is no easy thing to stand still and give no help while a small child deducts ten from fifteen. But you who have travelled, you who have met people who have really done things, rulers, writers, thinkers or artists, you who appreciate beautiful things, you who believe and you who love greatly, are you not in many ways better equipped than most nursery governesses to introduce your child to God, man, and the universe?

Education is a Life, but, if we are to train others we *must train ourselves*. We must know the elementary laws of physiology and psychology. We must read widely. I have found no better guides than Miss Mason's books, particularly *Home Education* and *An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education*. The first of these I read when my little boy was two years old, and I have often read it and referred to it since, and also to *Parents and Children* and *Some Studies in the Formation of Character*.

I have also found helpful Dr. Creighton Miller's books, *The New Psychology and the Parent* and *The New Psychology and the Teacher* (these books are not P.N.E.U. books).

In *An Essay towards a Philosophy of Education* we read of three educational instruments: (1) The Atmosphere of Environment; (2) The Discipline of Habit; and (3) The Presentation of Living Ideas.

Miss Mason felt that maternal love was a very important factor in early education. Many mothers abdicate at the

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outset and send their four-year-old child to a kindergarten school, even if they have not got the excuse of an only child needing companionship; these mothers do not know what they miss, and they deprive their children of something vital that only a mother can give in these early years. How important home influence is, not only in early childhood, but all through life! Speaking at a Parents' and Teachers' Conference, held at Cambridge recently, the head mistress of one of our big London High Schools, deplored the present tendency of parents to leave everything, even the religious education, to the teacher; school Bible lessons do not sink in if

they are not backed up in the home, and it is not in this matter alone that we need more co-operation between parents and teachers.

The second educational instrument is the discipline of habit. Once again, read the chapter in *Home Education* on "Habit is ten natures." Keep to what you say and let there be one method for all; mother, father and nurse must co-operate in training the children in good habits from the start. Habits of the mind, physical, moral and religious habits. The result is peace and happiness for all. There is an excellent pamphlet, by Helen Webb, that can be obtained from the P.N.E.U. for sixpence, called *Thought-Turning as a factor for training young children*, and *A Talk to Nurses*. A group of our Cambridge nannies held a study circle to discuss this and also some passages suitable for the purpose in *Home Education*. This was a great success.

Lastly, we come to the presentation of living ideas. I hope I have already shown you how the P.U.S. endeavours to give living books to our children. We are told not to "despise them." Our children have a right to the best in literature and in the arts and sciences. "Suffer little children . . ." Give them the Bible text, Shakespeare, Bunyan, not books "Told to the children," and boiled down, with no meat left. We must not "offend them" either. Our own self-conquest must be undertaken before we can expect it of our children. They are mimics and are quick to imitate our tricks of impatience, untidiness or unpunctuality; they are also quick to respond to the best we can give them.

Always let us trust them. When we have done our best to train them, then let us learn to stand aside and let them

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spread their wings (and this is the hardest part of all), but if we have taught them to believe and put their trust in their Unseen Guide and Friend, we need have no fear. "Finally, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honourable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."

¹ Sir James Kay Shuttleworth was given the Fothergillian gold medal for life saving, when he discovered a new form of resuscitation from drowning.