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THE PLACE OF HABIT.¹

By the late HELEN WEBB, M.B. (Lond.).

“You have two aims to pursue each without sacrifice of the other, first, that the child shall grow up with firm and promptly-acting habit; and second, that it shall retain respect for reason, and an open mind.”

—*Lord Morley.*

If one did nothing more than read these wise words, long ago written by Lord Morley, attention would have been turned to the chief issues connected with the question of habit—habit which controls the whole of life, and from the first, whether we will or no, begins to take possession of the child—that fine chain which Dr. Johnson truly says is too light to be felt until it becomes too strong to be broken.

Every child born into the world is a person, a human being full of potentialities, which life will make manifest, as time goes on and opportunities are given. In acting our part towards each some of our earliest duties are those which relate to the formation of habits. The body with which the infant comes should from the first be so nurtured and trained that by the time he has put himself in relation with the main facts and interests of the world which he sees around him, and is ready to act independently, he will find himself the owner of a healthy body habituated to respond reasonably to the ordinary surroundings encountered in his daily life.

When the great grand-parents of to-day were children, the “good” child of early and mid-Victorian days was the methodical over-trained child, in whom originality ran the risk of being stifled for the sake of order and decorum. To be obedient without question, and not to disturb the grown-up people were counted as among the very highest virtues. The Lucy Deanes were admired, while the Maggie Tullivers met with little charity.

The natural outcome of such ideals was, in the next generation, the naughty child, the “spoilt” child. Average parents having themselves suffered from too much suppression, hesitated

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to submit their children to the same, and so troublesome, disobedient children, a burden to themselves, and the terror of friends and relations became alarmingly common.

“Me this unchartered freedom tires,
I feel the weight of chance desires.”

was, with these, a common and wearying experience. Now that these have become the parents of to-day a new and better vision is coming to them, and they recognise the truth of what is embodied in Lord Morley’s words. They realise that their children ought to grow up with firm and promptly-acting habit, but that in their highest development they should retain respect for reason, and an open mind.

Now a habit may be defined as an action which has been performed so often in the same way, that, given certain conditions, or circumstances, it becomes easier to do it than to leave it undone.

In older children and on through the rest of life it is rare to form a habit which has not been initiated by what may be called an inspiring idea. This inspiration may be merely congeniality of the action to the character of the individual, but it is more often (especially in the young) imitation of some other person, or anything else, which suggests a real desire to do that special thing. Such an inspiration followed up by repetition of the action quickly crystallises into a habit.

In the young infant, however, nothing more is required than a few repetitions of an act once performed to develop habits of a firmness such as, if unsatisfactory, will fairly baffle the ingenuity and patience of the majority of parents to eradicate.

The new-born baby is an intense conservative, and we may all have observed how, even to the little child, the fact that anything has already been done, or done in a certain fashion, forms the most powerful reason why events should ever after follow the same course. This is the reason of all the misery of nurse's evening out. The mother has not realised exactly all the details of the process of going to bed, as usually carried out by the former, and baby feels the very foundations of the world to be shaken because an unfamiliar order is followed. He is not accustomed to it, therefore it is wrong.

"What does regularity matter *now*?" says some one. "Baby is so *very* young. We shall be more regular afterwards when he begins to notice more."

But his nerve-cells are noticing from the first day, and
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learning to respond to all kinds of familiar stimuli, and only require to be regularly exercised in one direction or another to become automatic in their action, and so carry on the minor matters of daily life wholesomely and without friction.

No infant is therefore too young to be properly trained, and his education, whether we will or no, for good or evil, begins at birth. If from the first hours of his life he does not form right habits he will form wrong ones, and once he has done the latter the battle will be hard. If we have allowed it, we shall assuredly reap the whirlwind.

In young infants we need never be afraid of establishing too many good and useful physical habits, because all that we can so secure are an investment for the future. They set in order the machinery of life, and so subserve health and make for nervous stability. They do not risk the power of free choice in wider action, as may be the case with many habits later on.

As the child grows older the fact that inspiring ideas are constantly the initiators of mental habits must never be forgotten. Just as food eaten with appetite is more easily digested than that which, though excellent, may be disliked, so the appetite of the mind must be remembered and allowed for. Moreover, all the juice, so to speak, should be sucked out of new ideas, and the performance of new actions before they are allowed to become mechanical. In the neglect of this last lies the danger of any learning which is reduced to that mere memorising, without interest or thought, so dear to the parents and teachers of past generations in the "tasks" they were in the habit of setting children to drone over.

Mental food is best assimilated when introduced by curiosity and living interest which are other names for intellectual appetite.

Habit is also a great storer of nerve-force. To make habitual as many as possible of the minor acts of life means the education of certain nerve centres. These learn to carry on processes essential to bodily health and daily good behaviour, without making too frequent

demands on those higher centres which should be free to attend to more complex matters. This gives strength and balance to the whole nervous system and makes the individual, as he develops, able to go further, both physically and mentally, than would otherwise be possible. It helps, in short, to establish greater nervous stability.

The best type of nervous stability in a fully developed
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human being is that described as mobile. This may be compared to that of the old rocking-stones set up by the ancients. These massive stones, beautifully poised on what is almost a mere point, have their centres of gravity so placed that, while they oscillate in response to pressure, they return to their original position on again coming to rest.

There is another stability of quite a different kind. It is such as an ordinary object, like a cube, for instance, assumes when, after being moved or lifted, it settles down again upon its base. This is known as immobile stability, and to it may be compared the mental condition of the person in whom, by reason of an uninterrupted routine, habit has come to invade nearly every department of life.

Anyone with this latter kind of stability cannot be said to “retain respect for reason and an open mind.” It is not possible for him to think widely or see far. He necessarily lives by fixed formulæ in a narrow circle, and in any new circumstances which may occur has little power of choosing his course wisely.

In childhood, of course, there is no danger of quite such a hide-bound condition developing, at least in the case of a normal child. It is, however, by recognising such exaggerated instances that we may realise the kind of danger which may arise from allowing habit too much place and power in education. It is a good servant, but a very bad master.

At an astonishingly early age little infants begin to give startling evidence that they are indeed persons. They shew minds and wills and power of choice, so that even while the earliest habits are becoming formed reason begins to illuminate the whole being. They are all there, but very ignorant still, and it behoves us, while not laying upon them burdens of choice for which they are not yet prepared, to treat them as reasonable beings. Hence we must allow to the vigorous mind a sufficiency of mental food convenient for it. The word “allow” is used advisedly. There is no reason to force. Spread the table by letting common life go on around him and baby will make his own choice of interests, and observe what appeals to him. From time to time talk to him without excitement, shewing every-day things around him by name. Long before he can speak and say the words he will in this way know what is meant when some object is mentioned, and even obey orders given in words.

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How often it has been observed that a dog or a cat, which has been talked to and made a companion of, becomes intelligent and reasonable to a degree which would never have come to pass had it been unnoticed and left alone. How much more is this so in the case of a baby. On this account first children, who are more talked to by their mothers, tend to speak earlier, and the same is noticed in the youngest members of large families, whose brothers and sisters give them much attention. On the other hand we have all heard of the man who, brought up in complete isolation, reached adult life with an altogether undeveloped mind.

We must not leave the subject of habit, especially in the National Baby Week, without reminding mothers and nurses what an important piece of furniture is the nursery clock, and

how great a part punctuality plays in both the mental and bodily health of a baby. His whole system responds to it, and regularity for every happening of the day is the most important element in the establishing of good bodily habits, of every kind. Let baby have, with unvarying punctuality, his food, his bath, his bed, with his long quiet sleep in the freshest of air, and everything else which concerns him, and you will (if heredity does not happen to be too strong against you) send him on into life with a sound, reliable constitution.

Not only this, but you will at the same time lay deep in his nature a habit of prompt obedience and accuracy in daily life, which will prevent later the tendency to dawdle and question each little command, which wastes more time and causes more irritation than almost any other nursery fault.

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