

PHYSICAL CULTURE.¹

BY MISS ROTHERA.

I AM really very glad of this opportunity of introducing the subject of physical culture for discussion, because it is one to which I have devoted my life and in which I am deeply interested. It is a subject comprising so many different aspects and including so much within its scope that one is baffled at first to know where or how to begin, and therefore, I propose to look at it chiefly from two main points:—

(1) Its place and purpose in the education and development of our children.

(2) Its usefulness as a profession and training for our girls.

And first of all, perhaps it would be as well to get into our minds a clear idea of what physical culture exactly means. Nothing to my mind, is more fatal than to confuse it with tomboyishness, roughness, over-developed muscular growth, untidy loose baggy clothes, and a general sense of masculinity (to coin an expressive word!), and yet, such a combination of ideas is only too common, and there are many people to-day, who, directly the words “physical culture” are introduced turn away with a shrug of the shoulders and say, “No thank you, nothing of that for me. I don’t wish to see my girls grow into untidy little hoydens.” I always feel regretful that this feeling is possible, because looked at from its highest aspect, I consider physical culture an absolute necessity for anyone who is to be fully developed and who wishes to be able to use her life and capacities to their fullest advantage. My ideal is, that from the very beginning of a child’s life, the highest and best of its physical nature should be developed and educated exactly as we educate its mental and spiritual nature, and, as it grows in knowledge and mental culture, so it shall grow in bodily and physical culture, until by this means its life is rounded to a full, perfect, noble womanhood, strong in bodily health and strength, cultured in mind,

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and refined in thought, and fitted and able to fill a useful part, whether in the home, the school, or some other noble and good profession.

And physical culture, should, if used in its highest sense provide:—

(1) *A means* and a help towards healthy bodily development.

(2) *A cultivation* of the powers of self-control, endurance, pluck (*i.e.*, games, healthful exercise, gymnasium classes).

(3) *A power* of grace and beautifully rounded movement (dancing, balance movements, æsthetic movements).

(4) *A safeguard*, or rather a *counter-acting influence* against those terrible bodily evils, such as flatfootedness, crooked backs, weak chests, anæmia, etc., etc. which our present-day civilization has brought in its wake.

(5) *An elevation* of the whole mental and moral condition by the increased health and bodily vigour which is sure to ensue.

This is no idle dream, but a fact which has been proved over and over again, and which can be illustrated by many living examples.

And here, before going on, I should like to mention, how *very important* it is that mothers should be able to notice for themselves whether their children are growing up strong and sturdy or not.

Such things as I have just named, spinal curvature, flatfoot, anæmia, etc., etc., are one and all easy to cure if taken in their early stages, but once let any one of them get a good grip and they are most difficult to cope with, causing oftentimes much ill-health; perchance much pain; always infinite trouble: while their ill-effects make themselves long felt and often materially injure a girl—if not for always—at any rate for a good many years of her young life. If a parent is doubtful about such things, it seems to me that the simplest thing is for her to have her children occasionally thoroughly examined by a doctor, say for instance, at three years old, and again at seven, and again at twelve. If all is healthy and normal, well and good. If any incipient weakness shows itself it can be watched and, if need be, treated and remedied. In the same way frequent visits to the dentist are a good thing. And I am sure all here present know for themselves how much suffering

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has been entailed in the past on children, through defects in eyesight or hearing being unnoticed and allowed to go from bad to worse. Fortunately, this is very different nowadays, as the number of “bespectacled” children proves, and I hope that in the near future, we shall hear of far fewer spinal curvatures and troubles “of that ilk.”

But to continue: Of course, within recent years many systems of physical training have been introduced and advertised, and it is a genuine difficulty for the uninitiated to weigh their respective merits and to judge between them. To such, I can only say, study the question for yourselves, and, by common sense and knowledge prove for yourselves what is genuine and what is false, what is likely to be helpful and what harmful, and lastly, what is based on rational sound scientific principles and what is not.

As far as my own experience and observation go (and I have visited schools and colleges both here in England, and abroad in Germany, Denmark and Sweden), I have concluded that a system based upon the Swedish methods is the most satisfactory. Of all other systems I have found none so natural, so carefully progressive, so productive of good results as Ling’s Swedish System. I do not say it is perfection, but I do say this, that it supplies a very great need, that its methods are the outcome of carefully thought-out scientific and philosophical principles, that its movements, both educational and medical have, one and all, a thoroughly scientific reason underlying them, and that, last but not least, it is approved of and used by most of our leading medical men both here in Great Britain and in many places abroad.

But in studying these questions for ourselves, no one can help us so much as Nature, if only we will go back to her and try to learn the lessons she would teach. Has it ever struck you, who like myself, have watched the growth of girls and flowers at the same time, how much their physical culture has in common? In the one case there is the consideration of diet, sun, light, air and physical needs; in the other there is the influence of soil, sun, light, air and rain. Madame Bergman Oesterberg, the great leader of this movement of physical culture, has expressed the idea I wish to impress upon so clearly. I cannot do better than quote her words:—“The

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plant needs soil to suit its individual wants; the diet of the child should also be individual, as all children do not thrive on the same food stuff. Light, sun and air are indispensable to plant as well as child life. Deprive them of it and they will grow anæmic. ‘Force’ them, hasten their development against Nature’s time, and again both will ‘overgrow their strength.’ They will

ripen and run to seed prematurely. This means weakness in the parent plant as well as in the offspring.

“On the other hand, support Nature’s intentions in wisdom and moderation, nip off the signs of too early maturity, hinder the plant from producing fruit in its early existence and the parent plant will grow in strength and the fruit of next season will gain perfection. The understanding and right application of all physical conditions necessary to human life, I call *Physical Education or Training*, a training to commence with childhood and continue through life.”

And so we learn with Nature’s own simplicity these simple lessons. That we must provide for our children proper physical conditions, *i.e.* —

(1) Rational and simple food given at regular intervals and in suitable amounts.

(2) Bright, fresh, sunny rooms, with, wherever possible, plenty of pure fresh air.

(3) Sensible, rational, warm clothing, light in weight, and suitably made so as in no way to impede growth and development, or to hinder the free use of their bodies and their limbs.

For, again to quote Madame Bergman Oesterberg, “movement means life. Everything moves as long as it lives. Even death, which seems to us so still, is only the momentary lulling in the eternal movement forward and onward. Light and sound *travel*. Birth and growth, all functional activity, such as circulation and respiration, represent movement. Movement is the surest indication of a child’s physical condition. Even the hidden condition of its brain may be discovered by muscular contraction of face and hands. Like kid and kitten the young child should be always on the move. It should incessantly run to and fro, roll over, laugh and shout with constant change of posture and attitudes, with continual efforts, never long continued, interrupted only by spells of

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rest, so deep, so unconscious that the child can actually be moved, lifted and carried bodily away without its awakening. Such are play and rest in early childhood. On this line of gambol and physical frolic depend future vigour and health. It should, modified, continue into youth. Cut it short, and early maturity, with its fatal exhaustion, will lurk in the vicinity. Encourage play and activity, reserve blood supply for growth of brain, and we may hope to restore too early development to its right time and season, with the result that the expenditure of woman will not be enforced on the child—that anæmia, the foe of womanhood, the follower of prematurity and the destroyer of the future race, will be held at a safe distance, and its destructive achievements abated.”

But look how, in our upbringing, we curtail and hinder Nature. “Nature orders the child to move and fidget—school threatens bad marks; Nature forbids prolonged efforts—school orders attention for hours.” Thus, whether in our own homes, or, as the case may be with many here present, in our schools, it behoves us to arrange carefully the proportion of study and play, of sitting still and movement, of mental activity and physical activity—lest by bad physical condition and environment we create bad habits in the children—habits which *systematic exercise only* can prevent and cure.

And here I should like to say a word of practical advice about children at school.

Every girl should, unless specially certified as unfit by a doctor, take part in the organised drill, gymnastic and dancing classes, and also in the games and walks arranged by the school. And every parent should see to it that they do not send their children to schools where

the very best of such things are not provided.

For when, even at schools where such facilities are afforded, you come to consider the hours spent by girls in sitting in their desks, cramped up, poring over their books and lessons and needlework, etc., etc., you will find the proportion of time spent on physical training is very small. School absorbs the greater part of a child's day. School should therefore guarantee that no bodily harm occurs to the children under its charge.

But, having found a suitable good school, where it is clearly
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understood that weakness of body reflects on mind and morals, and where your children's physical life is therefore jealously guarded and cared for, I should like to say, speaking as a teacher to mothers, nay, I should like to beg you with all seriousness and earnestness, to do *your* level best, and your *just* share in seeing that these aids to your children's good health are looked after and cared for in your homes during the holidays. That your children are *made* to sit up properly and not allowed to loll about in easy-going, comfortable, lazy attitudes, when amusing themselves with their story-books or games. That they are *made* to go to bed at a reasonable time and not allowed to go out night after night, or sit up until ten or eleven or even twelve o'clock. That their food is sensible, dainty and nice as you like, but not with an unlimited amount of chocolates and sweets, etc., which may be eaten at any and all hours of the day.

I see some of you smile, and can almost imagine I hear you saying to yourselves, "so like a schoolmistress," but believe me, I once heard with my own ears this naïve remark from a child just about to start home for its holidays. "How perfectly lovely, now I shall be able to be *as slack as I like* and not have to sit up at all!"

And I have also noticed over and over again, among my various cousins and small friends at home, the absolute laxity which is allowed to exist, just because "it is holidays just now, and the children must have a *good time*, poor dears, before they go back to school." I think, if parents realised, even in the smallest degree, the grave results which inevitably follow such latitude, upon their children's physical and moral nature, they would be the very first to say—and with real meaning too—"It *shall not be*."

But I fear I am trespassing too much on your patience and time, so I will hasten on to the second point of my little talk, and be as brief as possible over it.

In these days of speculation and quickly made (and more quickly lost) fortunes, I think every one of our girls, no matter what her station in life, should be fitted and trained to be able to earn her own living should need arise. And, should a girl show any capacity or aptitude, either from her own physique or inclination, or from her love of children, or sick people, I
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can wish her no better fortune than to take up physical training as a profession.

To begin with, the effect upon herself, physically and mentally, is bracing, strengthening, invigorating.

To quote Madame Bergman Oesterberg once more: "Of all the professions in the world, conceived as I have tried to explain it, I know not of any more human, none more humane. It is the best training for motherhood. Remember, it is not 'hips firm' or 'arms upward stretch,' it is *not* 'drill'; but it is the moulding, and shaping, and re-forming the most beautiful and plastic material in the world—the human body itself."

In England to-day, there are several places where a good physical training may be had.

And my own dear Alma Mater, of course, the one I hold as being the best of all. This is the first college of its kind, and the largest. Madame Bergman Oesterberg, a Swede by birth, came to England, originally, at the invitation of the London School Board, 1881, and in four years she trained one thousand teachers. Finding it was impossible to do the work she had set herself with such material as came to the Board School, she established a training college at Hampstead, 1885. From there she removed to Dartford Heath, in 1895, and at Dartford the college with its beautiful buildings and beautiful grounds is at present in vigorous working order. The objects of the college are carefully set forth in the prospectus. The students, with but few exceptions, take the course provided with a view to earning their own living. This course is a two year one, and the fees, in all, mount up, roughly speaking, to about £250.

When a girl enters college, and this she does entirely at the discretion of Madame, certain physical measurements are taken—height, weight and lung capacity, these are repeated at intervals and the record kept. If the weight is found to decrease, the reason why is sought, and a strict watch kept over that particular student's diet. The course of study is pretty much as follows: drill and gymnastics, with a most careful study of the theory of gymnastics, medical gymnastics and massage, and practical experience in the treatment of spinal curvature, flat feet, narrow chests, anæmia, etc., etc. Also a thorough course of hygiene, physiology, anatomy, [p 771]

anthropometry, pathology. Besides this, there is a special course of dancing and æsthetic movements, vaulting, etc. Also games of all description, both indoor and outdoor, form an important part of the curriculum. The students gain practical experience in teaching in the various schools round about the college, and practical experience of medical work, both among themselves and various visiting patients.

And a girl, who has passed through such a training, is indeed, usually, a sensible, useful, helpful member of society, and has gained in mental and moral vigour which will be invaluable to herself personally and to everyone with whom she comes in contact.

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