

## Education is a Discipline

BY N. CHUBB

‘What that lad needs is discipline’!

How many times has this been said unthinkingly? What exactly does one mean by ‘discipline’? When one comes to think of it—all one’s life on earth is a discipline. We are continually being frustrated—or disciplined—by circumstances. We cannot even eat our cake and have it!

According to Charlotte Mason’s dictum there is also the discipline of  
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habit. The law of habit is a blessed gift to us harassed mortals. We can do so many chores without stopping to think about them. Every time we do a certain thing we make it easier for us to do it next time. But habit is a two-edged sword. It is as fatally easy to form a bad habit as a good one, perhaps easier, for inclination helps us there.

Here comes the discipline. We wish to—rise earlier—slim—give up smoking—what have you? So we begin with a new resolution. The first few times are struggles—but let us persevere—and never let ourselves backslide even once—and one morning we shall find ourselves springing out of bed before the alarm goes off; or that we have lost two pounds in weight; or lost the craving for a morning cigarette.

We all want to give our children the best in life. Here is our chance to endow them with the priceless heritage of a set of good habits. I need not enumerate them; they are obvious to most of us.

The great thing is—to persevere, and never allow a slip back—if possible—from the good habit we are trying to form. I know it is a counsel of perfection to many a busy mother nowadays. But, believe me, it pays dividends in the long run.

I remember a little thing not yet two years old, who fed herself beautifully with a spoon. Her mother told me it took six months of constant attention but it paid in the end.

I also remember a mother who gave her small boy a sweet every time he threw a tantrum to stop him howling. She had prepared a rod for her own back.

As to bad habits, which the children so easily form for themselves, how do we eradicate them? First of all, be positive. Don’t say, ‘Don’t’. Always inculcate the appropriate virtue, if possible. Begin a habit with an idea. Suppose your child is always late for everything, breakfast, getting off to school, getting [sic] back to tea, for her Guide meeting, getting to bed. On the other hand, she is good-natured, considerate and easy-going. If you can get her to understand that it is discourteous to keep people waiting, inconsiderate to be late for meals, and generally selfish to be unpunctual, it might be possible to get her to mend her ways by trying to form the habit of punctuality.

Have you ever considered the almost frightening power of ideas? Consider how a great and dominant idea has changed someone’s life—for good or evil. Nurse Cavell—‘Patriotism is not enough’. Marconi—‘I must find this out’. Louis XIV—‘L’état c’est moi’.

But beware! How often have I, half-joking, thrown out a notion. It has been taken up by the children and followed through to its logical conclusion, or the bitter end.

Let us now consider some habits which Charlotte Mason considers of paramount importance: the habit of prompt obedience. ‘The man who can make himself do what he wills has the world before him’, she says.

Then there is the formation of intellectual habits, which will stand your child in good stead when he is at school. A trained mind saves time and mental labour. Such habits are: attention—concentration—thoroughness—accuracy and reflection which are not easy to come by naturally.

You will say that it is the business of the school to form these habits. But parents can do a great deal to foster them as well. A great many opportunities occur during school holidays.

Another habit which some of us might consider old-fashioned, but to my mind very precious, is 'The  
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Habit of Sweet Thoughts'. I remember Charlotte Mason telling us that one was so apt to pass by all the pleasant little things of everyday life; to take for granted a fine day, spring flowers, a good meal, in fact 'some of my favourite things' especially when one is young. I used to look forward ardently to the next great occasion, and the intervening days had to be got through somehow.

'The Habit of Sweet Thoughts', as Charlotte Mason puts it, can be started from an early age. A small child's facial expression is easily read, and when resentful, sulky or selfish tendencies appear, then is the time to change the child's thoughts, as one does when he falls down and hurts himself. There is a great deal in 'changing a child's thoughts' and much may be done.

I need not labour the point of forming habits in the religious life of your children—each has his own beliefs—but let me implore you to give them a firm foundation of habit and belief.

One great thing about the forming of habits is that to some extent it does away with the effort of decision. Our children should be able to rest on a set of good habits and a settled routine and an authority which they can obey. Charlotte Mason says that one of the mind's greatest efforts is that of decision and our children will have plenty to decide about as they get on in life. Let us see that they have a happy and ordered childhood.

Good habits are going to help our children, but they must play their part also if they are to grow up good and responsible persons. So far I seem to have sketched a good little puppet full of good habits, obedient and happy—but something is wrong. My puppet seems to lack something. A real child is bursting with enthusiasm and initiative and a thirst for knowledge, good, bad and indifferent. In fact, most children I know have as their motto 'Try everything once'. How are we to cope with this? Surely, self-discipline is the answer and there again one goes back to the most practical of all things—a great idea.

At a certain age, varying with the child, I think it is possible to convey the idea that God wants us to be good; but He has given us free will because if we choose to do His will, it is much better than if we were compelled to do so. It is a fine thing to make oneself do what is right.

I remember passionate arguments when I was a student as to whether you were more blessed when you did your duty because it was right or because you loved doing it. I still wonder.

Charlotte Mason's doctrine of 'The Way of the Will' will help us also. Only one idea can enter your mind at any given moment. It is for your will to choose which idea you allow to enter, and which idea you will throw out. Here is surely the way to self-discipline.

So may your children be grounded in good habits, and learn to discipline themselves, as they grow in grace and in favour with God and man.