

THE PLAYROOM LEAFLET.

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I have frequently been asked whether I really like teaching. 'It always seems to me,' my questioner would continue, 'such a wearisome job—teaching sundry children—and no sooner have you succeeded in instilling some knowledge, seeing some result than they pass on and you have to start all over again, teaching more tiresome children the same old things.' A dreary prospect in truth, but it is often impossible to convince these pessimists that there should be and usually is quite a different outlook in the minds of the teachers. For one thing nothing is ever the same. With each term, each week, even each day, we are gaining new experience, we have to face and contend with new situations, above all to understand new elements of character. Perhaps in that last idea we have the most definite disproof of sameness in teaching. *No two children are alike, no two require the same treatment or method.*

It is here that we fall back with relief to the stableness of Miss Mason's teaching. Here are no black and white rules for the regulation of *all* children, but rather a strong framework of all-embracing principles which will prove a secure foundation for the buildings of experience.

Perhaps the greatest and widest of all Miss Mason's principles and the one most surely connected with the 'playroom' is that of the child as a PERSON. The children come to us, [p 715]

especially the little ones, as real individuals; Persons with individual temperaments and individual characteristics.

Realizing this fact in all its significance it is our duty and privilege to give all our powers, all our beings, not to material achievements, but to the building up and strengthening of those individual characters, that they may become good citizens of this, or let us hope, a better civilization.

I must confess that *my* Playroom venture was fairly forced upon me by a determined mother of an only child of 4. I shall never forget my own dismay on the first arrival of this minute person. Whatever does one do with her? I thought; such a contingency had never before come my way. However Miss 4 was perfectly composed, said farewell to her mother without a tremor, and marched into the schoolroom and into our hearts, where she still remains a very definite entity. This formation of a Playroom is a step I have never regretted; it has proved the most enthralling side of our work. The arrival of the younger ones enabled us to conform more nearly to the ideal class. We do not boast a large school but our class is a comfortable size to be run as a large family, its members being collected daily by car from a radius of some eight miles, which includes many downland villages where education presents a real difficulty. Their ages range from 4 to 11 years. It is impossible when speaking of our playroom to segregate it from the general activities of the class.

Miss Mason frequently emphasised the importance of a quiet growing time at home, until the children were six. It is rather tragic to realize that this quiet time is in many cases no longer available for the children in their homes. In the press of present-day affairs and circumstances there are few families able to boast a real nursery; the children must grow as best they can, either living in a whirl of grown-up activities, because the mother having nowhere to leave them must needs take them with her wherever she may be forced to go, or

conversely running wild in completely uncontrolled liberty because there is no one with time to provide wise guidance of their lives. This is not heedlessness or even lack of knowledge on the parents' part, but rather the force of unavoidable circumstances. It surely

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falls to us to try and make what substitute we can to meet the demands of this new régime. Clearly our playrooms must be so planned as to supply as far as it is possible the missing nurseries.

Bearing this in mind I will try to give you some impression of how we organise *our* particular Playroom.

Perhaps our chief object is to establish an environment of joy and peace, a children's world where the worries and peculiarities of the grown-ups do not penetrate. Even the youngest comers to the playroom have a sense of themselves as persons, but now they are to meet a new sensation, for in the companionship of other children old and young they first come into contact with a community of other 'Persons,' whose personalities, however conflicting they may be in effect, must be taken into consideration as much as their own.

Let us imagine that Miss 4 year-old is starting school. She arrives and finds herself in a throng all removing coats and shoes, etc., and slowly and with some difficulty *she* is extracted from her garments and shown her peg where they are placed, and then Miss 5 year-old is commissioned to escort her to the playroom. For the next week or so this helplessness continues. And then one day you are delayed and on coming to the cloak-room you find her fully clad and ready to go out. You discover that Master 7 year-old has tied her shoes "cos she can't tie bows yet and I can.' So our little newcomer has learnt not only 'that she can get into her coat without a grown-up,' but also another important fact 'that when you are big you help somebody smaller than yourself.' And from this time her independence goes on by leaps and bounds and there are no more helpless struggles with coat sleeves, and even slipper buttons can be done up successfully.

Besides this theory of big helping little, the family spirit expresses itself in the keen interest shown in the little ones' work. 'Do you know that B— wrote a whole line of 'F's' by herself to-day?' Or 'J— counted quite right as far as 10 this morning.' Or again 'R— paints quite nicely now, doesn't he?' This finds its counterpart amongst the little ones in an earnest desire to merit such approbation and in healthy emulation in imitating their elders.

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For actual lesson-hours the playroom people must of necessity work separately. Upstairs in the big sunny sitting-room the children have each a small table and chair of their own and also their own corner in the big cupboard where their private treasures are kept. Here a skeleton time-table is carried out.

9.20. Arrival followed by Occupations.

10.30. Break with ten minutes for Drill and Dancing and approximately an hour for free play.

11.40. Further Occupations, and Handicrafts.

12.30. School finishes.

During the first half hour or so in the morning the children are free to play. Many small jobs come into this time such as sweeping out the doll's house or tending any growing seeds and

bulbs. Afterwards comes about forty minutes of more definite occupation, with the slightly older ones, five years, time for learning their letters, practice in making these with chalks, in counting and making the number patterns. As a beginning there is much joy in colouring the letters which are outlined in large size on cards and these may be added to the private store as they are learnt. For counting we make use of many objects but especially coloured counters, learning the patterns and so introducing the idea of addition and subtraction. There are so many delightful variations and games for teaching these matters, let it suffice to say that by five and a half the children are well acquainted with all their letters, the names and sounds, and able to make these in chalks and pencil; and have also gained some elementary ideas of number. Besides this children love to learn little poems, which give opportunity to correct bad pronunciation. Stories read or told are of course a constant pleasure, the 'Peter Rabbit' books being perhaps our favourites and with the older ones these form an introduction to narration. Painting is a joy to all, and even the youngest take to it with alacrity and soon start to gain control over the wandering clumsy fingers; help with colour mixing is all part of the fun and is quickly picked up in its elementary forms. And then of course there are handicrafts, a most important part of playroom occupations and too varied and numerous to be told in detail.

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I feel this list of occupations may sound too serious, but you must not imagine our playroom as a serious affair. On the contrary everyone is chatteringly busy with their own individual concerns, and periodically inquisitive as to everyone else's too. A place where there is so much and so varied an assortment of occupations to choose from that, as one person of four informed me, 'I am really so busy to-day I don't know how I'll get everything done.'

In the playroom there is a public supply of toys including a large box of wooden bricks, a little old lorry very useful for carting the bricks about in, and affording many opportunities for skilful driving or disastrous accidents round the furniture. There are too boxes of letters and numbers, a sand tray, also clay for modelling and the never failing joy of scrapbooks, for which a large box is kept supplied by the united efforts of the class. It is delightful to see a 7 or 8 year-old, superior to such employment, arriving with a handful of scraps or cards and the remark, 'I thought the *little* ones might like these for their scrapbooks.'

Perhaps the best time of the morning is the 10.30 Break when we all unite first for drill, singing or games and then for play. Here is our family at its best. The little ones delight in imitating the drill or dancing of the older ones, and would be bitterly offended were it suggested that they were too little. The play hour which follows brings with it further lessons of unselfish 'give and take' which have already been introduced in the sharing of toys upstairs. This time, spent out-of-doors whenever possible, is entirely free for the children to amuse themselves. The large garden provides many chances for nature study, as well as good opportunities for games, and is also supplied with swings, a large sand-pit, and several small carts, etc. Here the children mix big and little, share and share alike, learn by bitter experience sometimes the laws of 'fair-play,' and self preservation which must come to them all. To me this free time is the most important period of the mornings because then the influence of tradition has full play. It is amazing to see how quickly the little ones recognise 'what is *done*' and 'what is *not done*' at school. For example: the

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school bell rings and there is a scamper of feet to get back to the schoolroom, the babies

instinctively follow their elders and quite unconsciously have imbibed the first traditional habit that 'you must obey at once,' and it never occurs to anyone to violate this ruling. Another memorable arrival was that of a small boy of five whose one idea when he had finished with anything was to fling it far from him. His coat was wrenched off and would be flung in one direction, his shoes in another, the toy he was tired of would be carelessly hurled into a far corner or perhaps at the sound of the bell the cart he was pulling would be dropped where it stood in the middle of the drive or at best shoved into some convenient bush. But here public opinion again came to the rescue; it is the law that every man shall put away his own plaything, and the shocked tones in which the other children would say 'Tom, you've left your hoop lying on the lawn,' worked a far quicker transformation of habit than any remonstrance of mine could do.

The hour of playtime over (the older ones can only be allowed half this time of course) the company reassembles in the playroom for a quieter forty minutes before the journey homeward.

The summer term, to which we are all looking forward now, brings a very different programme; then all our doings are carried on with one eye on the weather, and alterations and variations are made in order to allow the maximum time out-of-doors. As soon as the weather is really warm there is a general migration, and the entire class moves into shady corners of the garden with all its occupations and their accompanying paraphernalia. 'What a business,' you will think. Well, yes it is, but after all everyone can carry *something* and the inventions of methods of getting themselves and their belongings down the steep grassy banks are worth a little lost time in another direction. The garden timetable is a free one, allowing plenty of time to revel in the summer days and at the same time supplying sufficient occupations for the necessary periods of rest during the morning. At this time too comes the added delight of bathes in the pool fenced in from the river, where many competitions and deeds of bravery are performed.

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I have tried to outline before you a picture of our 'family,' and you must fill in the centre with bright contrasts of much fun and laughter, many bickerings and scenes of woes, blending together into a landscape of content and peace.

Frequently the small children have come to us with the despairing remark from some harassed mother, 'A— is really getting so difficult and naughty, I don't know what to do with her.' Usually the answer is that A— has not had sufficient to occupy her. She slips naturally into the playroom environment and that 'difficult and naughty' period fades away, a thing of the past. To the children the playroom is a place where they are individual persons living unmolested in an atmosphere of peace and joy, with a supply of many varied occupations and a sense of wisely controlled freedom, which breeds in them a true spirit of goodness and happiness. This does not mean that the teacher in the playroom sits with her hands folded, on the contrary she has scarcely time to breath [sic] between the insistent demands: 'Please, will you thread my needle?' 'I can't open this glue, will you help me?' 'I've broken my blue chalk and will you sharpen it because I want to do the sky?'

Nevertheless surely the watchword of the playroom is Miss Mason's motto of 'Masterly-inactivity,' and its definition might be summed up as 'A growing time for PERSONS.'