

CHILDREN UNDER SIX

By CATHERINE LEAF.

It is very tempting to begin serious lessons before six years old, especially when children seem to be advanced for their years; but the P.N.E.U. make the rule that children shall not join the Parents' Union School or work on a definite time-table till they are at least six.

What is the reason for this rule?

Many eminent educationalists have been against children doing regular work before that age, and I have always understood that in Sweden children are not allowed to start serious lessons or attend a school that is more than a Kindergarten before the age of seven. My father¹ maintained that a child who comes to school at seven soon catches up and passes children who have started younger.

But there is another side to the picture.

There seem to be some Kindergarten schools where children are discouraged from learning their ABC and are not given anything to do which requires application. This is going to the other extreme and may do as much harm as overtaxing a child's mind. A child who watches an elder brother or sister having lessons may crave to do the same. An active child with a quick brain may be much happier if sensible occupations are provided. Dr. Moody, of the Child Guidance Clinic, believes that many restless children of under six would be calmer and happier if they were given something for 'their minds to bite on.' As much open air as possible, handicrafts, music, eurhythmics, dancing, nature study and what may be called 'organised play' should all be encouraged, and rudiments of the three R's learnt.

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It is good for children to have sensible occupations and the companionship of others of their own age. The give and take of brothers and sisters in the family home is surely the ideal; and some 'combined nurseries' consisting of children from two or more families seem to work well. In the case of only children or lonely ones where combined nurseries are unpractical, the only solution seems to be the Kindergarten or nursery school.

At the present time so many mothers have to do their own house work or are called to perform some kind of National Service, that even toddlers have to be 'parked' somewhere for part of the day. Many parents and teachers feel that this is not an ideal state of affairs, especially if it applies to children of four years old and under, but it must be recognised as a part of war-time conditions, and be provided for in the best possible way.

Our threefold aim should be to give our children every chance to build up health of body and mind, remembering that most vital part of every person—the Spirit. May I quote from that wise and beautiful mother, the late Lady Alastair Graham? She said: 'When a child is born, God places in our arms something that He Himself loves very much; it is precious in His sight; He has a plan for it; it can do for Him the work that no one else can do. What a responsibility for us! God trusts us with His children, we have a ministry to them. It is from a mother that a child first learns that God is its Heavenly Father. That it may speak to Him.' The beautiful words 'Suffer little children to come unto me' give all mothers a great privilege, but not every mother avails herself of it.

The simplicity and drama of the Bible stories always seem to have a special appeal to the little ones, and it is a great joy to open the doors to this storehouse of treasures. The wonder and the beauty of the Christmas story is a perfect introduction to the story of a Life which can inspire love and devotion from earliest years. Stories like those of Samuel, David

and Joseph are so fine that it is well to keep to the Bible text as closely as possible, even for quite young children. It is amazing how soon children are able to narrate from these stories and how vividly they illustrate them. I can still remember the drawing of Noah's Ark done by one of my children at a very tender age,

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and what fun it was too! I can also remember some of my nephews acting the scene of Jacob and Esau before their old father, Isaac. How much more interesting Bible lessons of this sort are to a solemn reading with lots of marginal references; these should surely come at a very much more advanced stage of study. It is only bad teachers who bore their pupils and thus blunt their enthusiasm.

One of Miss Mason's truest maxims was: that children have a natural desire to learn. It is a fascinating world that unfolds before a young child and there are innumerable delightful things to do and to discover. We should not be afraid of giving children some things that appear to us 'a bit over their heads.' Their answers surprise us at times. A child will intuitively grasp the inner meaning of some word, and get at the very kernel of the truth which to an adult may seem to need elaborate explanation. As we teach, how much we learn from our children. Why are we surprised? Do we forget that the Kingdom of God is like a little Child? One day when I was lamely trying to explain to a little child about sacrifice, I asked 'What must we give up?' she answered instantly: 'Our hearts.' Yes indeed: is not that the beginning of the spiritual life? I quote Lady Alastair Graham again: 'We enter the Kingdom of Heaven whenever we honestly put ourselves in God's Presence and try to do His Will.'

As the gardener waters his plants, so we encourage the growth of the body, mind and spirit in our young children. Before we cultivate the mind we must teach our pupil how to work. To ensure concentration, the golden rule is to remember this 'The younger the child the shorter the lesson.' Ring the changes often between singing, games, handicraft and occupations requiring more concentrated thought. Make sure that the children spend sufficient time in the open air so that their minds and bodies do not become overtired or cramped. Be strict about your charges maintaining a good posture; it is just as easy to sit up straight if this habit is acquired young. Many girls have been hindered from joining the Services on account of bad posture or from foot troubles, largely due to the slackness of their elders. (This fact I learnt from a lady doctor on one of the army medical boards.) I feel this is worth

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mentioning here because it is before a child is seven that good habits of posture are learnt.

The eyes of very young children are not yet adapted to focus minutely, and for this reason the first reading and music book should have extra large print. Large needles and bright coloured wools are less likely to strain the eyes than fine sewing. Bold brush drawing should be encouraged rather than the use of a pencil. This does not mean that work need be coarse or untidy. From earliest days a child can be trained in good workmanship and neatness. Clay modelling is an excellent exercise for the observation of form, and greatly preferable to those weak outline drawings which are so often indulged in by the budding artist. To-day originality is encouraged and the copies that used to be so popular have practically died out both in studio and schoolroom.

Let us give our children the best in literature and the arts, and let us expect the best from them; never be content with the second best. Discipline of thought and concentration are encouraged by the practice of narration from well written books. The discipline of habit

includes tidying toys, discouraging masses of unfinished handicrafts and bed-time punctuality.

As good work can never be expected when a child is tired, variety is to be encouraged and each period of work or play should be no longer than any particular child can concentrate on and enjoy. Children differ greatly in this, it is usually those who are growing fast who are most scolded for 'Wool-gathering.'

If a child is particularly bright, guard against pushing him on too fast, in so doing his strength may be overtaxed. Nothing is gained by exploiting a child and trying to turn him into a prodigy. The most precocious child is not necessarily the ablest in later years.

For particular examples of what a normal child can be expected to do at six years old, I quote from some notes made at the time my daughter was ready to enter the Parents' Union School.

The P.U.S. Entrance Form includes questions on Health and Physique, on height, weight and chest measurements, and drawings of the child's hand.

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There is also a *memory test*.

One question '*A Walk described*' is dictated word for word: 'Mummy moor-hen washed her babies and washed itself and then a visitor came for a little talk and then went away for a swim and didn't come back. We were sitting on a seat on the Fen, when we watched them.'

Special interests include:

20 birds recognised, five birds by their notes, flowers, insects, three rivers; a certain number of countries of Europe and Counties in England and Wales were known through playing with Jig-saw maps.

On the P.U.S. Entrance Form a specimen of *handwriting* was enclosed, it was returned with the remark: 'Good well formed letters.' (How many of us wish that this could be said of our writing in later years.)

Number. Simple subtraction and addition sums were done correctly and the Multiplication Tables were said straight through to 5 x 12.

This child begged to be allowed to listen to her brother's history and Bible lessons and was also present at some geography lessons.

Reading. From First Beacon Readers. Simple words.

Recitations. Hymns and Psalms. Short verses of poetry.

Singing. Simple nursery rhymes, French and English. 'The Babies' Opera.' Other occupations include: Dancing, skipping, raffia work, brush drawing, Nature Note Book, cutting out, Stencilling, modelling with Glitterwax and Plasticine.

The making of Xmas cards and calendars and pictures from coloured sticky paper and mozaic patterns.

Gardening.

Cooking on a small stove.

Keeping Pets, Riding and Swimming.

Her brothers at the same age had much the same occupations with the addition of Meccano and the care of a pony. At a slightly older age one of them made a model village, mostly out of folded paper, with real wheat growing in the field and match stick fence.

¹ Lord Shuttleworth, whose work on the Board of Education gave him wide experience. His father, Sir James Kay Shuttleworth, was one of the founders of Elementary Education in this country.