

## MISS MASON'S PRINCIPLES IN CHARACTER TRAINING.

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I AM going to speak of some of the ways in which mothers are able to act on Miss Mason's principles in the training of young children at home. I think children may be considered to be in the home schoolroom long before they are old enough to follow the curriculum of the Parents' Union School, and Miss Mason has given us a great deal of teaching on the subject of early training in her books, *Home Education* and *Parents and Children*. The more one has to deal with the practical application of these principles, the more one glows with enthusiasm for our Founder.

To those of us mothers, who believe whole-heartedly in Miss Mason's philosophy of education, and who aspire to teach

[p 445]

and train our own children, there is one source of particular satisfaction; we can begin at the beginning. Miss Mason has told us (these are her own words): "All real advance is along the lines of character; to direct the evolution of character is the chief office of education."

We have already heard this morning of the three great educational instruments which Miss Mason defined, and which she would have had us use; the atmosphere of education, the discipline of habit and the presentation of living ideas. These three are closely associated in their operation and in their results.

It is certain that in the first six or seven years of a child's life parents have the opportunity of modifying the atmosphere of his environment to an extent that can never occur again, habits are more easily formed, and occasions for presenting ideas are innumerable more frequent because of the child's insatiable thirst for knowledge. Therefore even from babyhood character training, which is first in importance, will go hand in hand with the acquisition of knowledge.

Miss Mason has emphasized the fact that mothers by virtue of their love and insight are specially qualified to train their children, and has reiterated Pestalozzi's saying that what is demanded of mothers is "a thinking love." A combination of love and knowledge is necessary. If mothers are to walk worthily of their vocation they must study the laws of the development of children—moral, mental and physical—and Miss Mason points out that the work of a mother who sets herself to understand these laws is infinitely lightened. I think many of us mothers need reminding of this, for we succumb to the temptation of leaving our children's training entirely in the hands of a nurse or nursery-governess on the plea that she is more competent than we are. The more knowledge a nurse has the better, but she should always be the *deputy* of the mother and directed by her, using *her* methods and sharing in *her* love and enthusiasm.

I can say very little here of the way in which we modify our children's environment even from early infancy. We all know that the mind cannot grow or the character evolve to the full, unless the body is in a condition of health, and that the atmosphere should be calm so that there may be no undue excitement of sensitive nerves—that fear may be eliminated and confidence abound. I will quote the words of the late Dr. Helen

[p 446]

Webb on the subject: "The children should be surrounded by cheerfulness to the level of joy, and quiet watchfulness without fuss." This saying is always an inspiration to me. What parents think, what they do, what they believe, and above all, what they are, will influence their

children and their children's children to an extent which transcends imagination.

For the first six years of his life, Miss Mason tells us, a child must learn from things and not from books. He is fully equipped with his five senses to get knowledge. Miss Mason has not recommended the use of complicated apparatus specially designed to cultivate the senses. The methods which she advocates are far simpler than this. I can answer for their wonderful success in training children to establish relations with the things that surround them, and to feed their hungry minds with the knowledge of Nature, of science and of art.

Children are intensely observant and their senses are keen. How are we going to help them to make use of their great powers? Miss Mason tells us. At the very moment when a toddler's glance alights on some new object let us show him that we are interested too in this wonderful thing and tell him something about it, so as to hold his attention for a moment. Miss Mason gives the example of a daisy which a tiny girl has picked. We must teach our babies to *look* when they see, to *listen* when they hear; and then later we shall find that habits of observation and of attention have been formed. We know that the habit of attention if it continues to develop will lead to the power of concentration—an absolute boon in after life—but do we realise how useful these habits will be even before the child is six years old? Flowers, trees, animals, insects, weather, sun and clouds, the times and seasons, the surrounding country, farms, fields, rivers, hills, the sea; all these will represent more than actual knowledge to the child; they will arouse the love of beauty and truth, and bring visions of Infinity and Harmony which will be remembered all through life.

Now let us think of some of the many other habits which will help in the formation of character. Miss Mason describes them as “those habits of the good life which are the outcome of vitalizing ideas.” There is not time to say much of bodily habits, but every P.N.E.U. mother knows how closely they are linked with mental habits. Little children take so much pride in washing and dressing *themselves*. It develops skill with their hands and gives them occupation and interest, and better still,

[p 447]

a sense of achievement and independence. Cleanliness, order, neatness, punctuality, “these virtues” Miss Mason wrote, “should be about the child as the air he breathes.” The problem of teaching children tidiness has been much discussed—putting things away is often a nuisance when a child wants to fill his precious time with other matters, or when he has to go to bed. I myself have found with my little girls that the important thing is for them to realise that everything must have a place of its own and go back into it—but the task of putting away need not always fall to the child. Grown-ups can lighten the work—they may sometimes even do it all—but in this case the children must know that they are doing it out of kindness and thank them. I find giving each child her own toy-cupboard, treasure-cupboard and dressing-table drawer is a spur to methodical habits.

A habit of fundamental importance is obedience to parents and their deputies, as our children will never enjoy liberty in its true sense until they have undergone the training which obedience will accomplish. Miss Mason urged mothers to realise that they are not free to allow or disallow their children's actions according to their own passing fancies, but that they must comply with certain laws because it is right and because it is good for them. Children will soon be able to understand this for themselves. We are the guardians of their consciences, and we must protect them from the effort of making moral decisions while their judgment is yet

immature. If the decision is of such a nature that a child is capable of making it for himself, then of course we must refrain from directing him. The habit of obedience can be acquired in babyhood or in any case before two years old.

With the formation of this habit, as with all the others, when it comes to practical politics we must remember never to allow a step backward. There must be steady and consistent training; this in itself imposes discipline. Miss Mason warns us that if we overlook a lapse “because the poor child has been trying so hard,” the work is undone, and mother and child must begin all over again. Once more it is a case of “quiet watchfulness.” It is in this connection that we simply must make sure that our nurse is working with us either in forming a good habit or in defeating a bad one. Miss Mason gives us another golden warning; she says “do not let the matter be a cause of friction.” This is sometimes very hard to enact, but how [p 448]

important! If once we start nagging we shall ourselves cause the child to lose ground and also to suffer!

There are of course so many habits of the good life for people under seven or eight that I cannot enumerate them now; some of the outstanding ones are the habit of truthfulness, the habit of courage and the habit of good execution. Much depends on the way in which we present the initial idea. Miss Mason condemned the extreme use of suggestion as encroaching upon the action of the child’s free-will, but she also wrote these words: “Idea and suggestion may be used as synonymous in so far as ideas convey suggestions to be embodied in acts.” In this sense we are constantly using suggestion. Take courage as an example. Once we have fired imagination with the splendour and the dignity of “being brave” what child will not have an ardent wish to show courage himself? Every knock and tumble and every disappointment will give us both—mother and child—an opportunity to develop the habit of courage. Unfortunately mothers and nurses are often in the way of suggesting fear rather than courage. Children catch this complaint as easily as measles, and the after-effects are far more harmful. At the beginning of a thunderstorm it is so easy to look delighted and tell our babies to listen for the lovely thunder which they will hear in a minute and to take them to the window to see the lightning, but one often hears people actually discussing in front of a child whether or not they are afraid of a thunderstorm!

Miss Mason laid stress on the habit of perfect execution, and in trying to form it in my own children I have found that it has a great bearing on character training and brings other good habits following in its train, such as perseverance, attention, patience, justifiable ambition—also modesty. Whatever it is, basket-work, needle-work, painting or modelling—all excellent and delightful pursuits even for the four, five and six year olds, *don’t* allow your friends and relations to praise the work unless it was the best the children could do, or at least the result of real steady effort. It is quite easy for us to give them only work which they are fitted to attempt.

Miss Mason has pointed out that the habits of gentleness, kindness, truthfulness and respect for other people are inspired by the atmosphere of home and tells us that “a mother simply cannot help working her own views into her children’s habits.” Children are wonderfully ready to develop habits of helpfulness [p 449]

to other people. Whatever it is, house-work, cooking or gardening, they are always keen and

proud to lend a hand.

We have been talking about engendering good habits—what if there are bad ones to be eradicated, or other defects to be cured? I feel that all mothers ought to study Miss Mason's chapters on these subjects; they are tremendously helpful, and we are all faced with such problems as what punishments to give or how to deal with tempers. Miss Mason considered that punishments, when necessary, should be the natural or the relative consequences of conduct. It is very difficult indeed sometimes to think the matter out and find the relative punishing consequence when the natural one would be too drastic or as Miss Mason puts it "precisely that which it is the mother's business to avert." It is quite permissible to warn children what the consequences of their naughtiness will be, if persisted in, but in this connection let us make sure that neither we nor our nurses shall ever make *threats* to our children which we do not intend to carry out.

All bad habits and any disagreeable traits must be corrected by setting up an opposite good habit. I think one cannot treat any form of habitual naughtiness with too much tenderness or sympathy. The great thing is to let the child understand what it is which he must try to conquer and ways in which he may do well. He will try, and will know that his mother is backing him up. If a child has got into the habit of telling untruths, tremendous tact and insight into his disposition are needed by his mother, and she may have to devote a very great deal of her time to the cure. Punishment—except for the temporary sad consequence of not being trusted—is likely to do harm. If the child is given to romancing Miss Mason explains that it may well be because "His ravenous imagination is not supplied with its proper meat of fairy tale." We must not only give our children fairy tales but time for their wonderful games of make-believe, and at the same time train them in habits of accuracy in all matters of fact. If they give some fantastic account of an incident we can say "how wonderful, but now tell me what really truly happened." I will give you an example. I came home one afternoon to find a little daughter of five disconsolate over a broken doll. "How did it happen?" I asked. "Well, Mummie, I was looking at her, and her head slowly began to wobble, and it wobbled *more* and *more* until at last it fell off!!" I remarked on the peculiarity

[p 450]

of this phenomenon and then asked, "How did it really happen?" At once she gave me the true version.

Dawdling is a bad habit which very frequently takes possession of little people, and the great cure for it seems to be occupation. Keep a child quite busy with things to do which are for the most part extremely pleasant and interesting, or best of all, which are useful to other people; and there will be no time to dawdle. This does not mean that we are going to overtax the child's brain or give him too many lessons. Dawdling must never be allowed; it leads to desultory thinking or mental inertia. It used to be supposed that highly-strung children should do little or no work but just run wild in the country. We can do far more to promote a calm and contented state of mind by suggesting a few ideas of usefulness or interest and by laying down lines of habit in pleasant places.

Miss Mason discovered a golden cure for displays of temper. She explained that tempers are the outcome of an innate tendency, and that the way to check them is by changing the child's thought at the very moment when the outburst is threatening. The habit is thus arrested. Anything will serve; send the child on a message; ask him a startling question; say

something funny; invent *anything*. Presence of mind is needed here! If we are too late and the storm is upon us, anger and scolding are quite useless. We must give the poor little victim our loving support just as if he were ill. He may see how sad we are about it but not that we are angry. Reproof will come when he is calm again. (Miss Mason always advised mothers to beware of too much talk and moralizing.) Not only temper, but many other faults can be checked by change of thought and by the power of one habit in driving out another.

Selfishness is a bad weed that has very little room to grow in a happy, useful, busy family. Root it out by encouraging the habit of kindness. Children so love to give presents and surprises of their own contriving to one another and to all the members of the family.

Eminent psychologists are telling us that moral results are produced by good habits which formerly were thought to be achievable only by self-control. Thirty-three years ago Miss Mason gave us this teaching in *Home Education* with detailed explanations as to how to proceed. Her methods are perfectly in accordance with the conclusions of the psychologists, and it

[p 451]

is thrilling to find that she went further than this, and showed that the formation of the right mental habits will actually develop the power of self-control.

The whole responsibility of giving children what Miss Mason calls “the discipline of self-compelling power” devolves on parents. Parents are the inspirers of their children. They can surround them with an atmosphere of love; they can hand on the idea or vision of Infinite Love in so far as they hold it themselves; and even the very power of loving may be cultivated and strengthened by habit.