WEDNESDAY, *May 7th*. 10.30 a.m.

Owing to the illness of Mr. Herbert Sutton, LADY CAMPBELL occupied the chair, and introduced DR. HELEN WEBB, M.B., who read a paper on

THOUGHT-TURNING AS A FACTOR IN THE TRAINING OF CHARACTER.

Before beginning to decide whether anything is, or is not, a factor in the training of character, let us be perfectly clear as to what we mean by the word character.

It has been said that disposition, intellect and genius come by nature, but that *character is an achievement*. By it we understand something which each of us possesses increasingly, something which is a resultant of our environment acting upon the disposition, intellect, etc., which we derive from our ancestors.

We live by ideas which all the time pour in through every channel of sense and understanding. We think thoughts—from these arises conduct, from conduct comes *character*. Character in its turn helps to determine future conduct.

Someone has said that a man is what he has made himself, by the thoughts which he has allowed himself, the words he has spoken, *the deeds he has done*.

Let us also have clearly before our minds at the outset, the two forces which, acting and reacting upon each other, build up character.

(*a*) The tendencies with which each individual child is born.

(*b*) The external influences of every kind which surround the human being from its birth to the grave.

(*a*) When the little child comes into the world his natural tendencies exist as possibilities, hidden away somewhere in the cells of his nervous system. They begin, however, to show themselves with astounding promptitude. First appear those which are common to the human baby as such, but almost as soon those which characterise the individual personality. For let us always remember that an infant, however young, is a *person* and has a *personality* of its very own.

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(*b*) External influences also, from the moment of birth, affect the child through every channel of sense which is, as yet, open. And never forget that they begin to *modify his very substance long before he can discriminate them*. The sum of these influences make up his environment which (however feebly), from the very beginning, acts and reacts upon the original tendencies born in him. No doubt that in the very first day of life the elementary stirrings of character (as just defined) are taking place, and by the end of the first month, assuredly habits of conduct may be plainly seen even by a casual observer. So it comes that from its birth on, those who have the care of an infant are every day and hour, rightly or wrongly, either in a positive or a negative way, helping or marring the character of the future man.

In nature's methods of development there is no haste, but no time is lost. Have you ever reflected that from the moment we put a seed in the ground to that when we see a perfect plant, and still on while this has life, a never-ceasing process of alternation of activity or rest (the one important as the other) continues without intermission? Wherever there is life this is

so. Let us recognise it in the growth of our children's characters. The good seed may fall, as we know, on very different kinds of ground, and fall into the hands of very different gardeners, and we have high authority for knowing that on this its future will greatly depend.

It is safe to say that over-meddlesome people about a child will do much more harm than those who let things alone, but unfortunately it seems difficult to do the latter. We are often influencing when we do not realise it. It therefore behoves us all to have some elementary ideas of the ways in which character is affected by our relations with those under our care, and of how immensely this will, later on, determine the relations of those persons with themselves.

The kind and degree of these first factors of character of course differ in every instance. We may safely say that in the whole history of the world no two people have ever been born, who exactly resembled each other. In some children the inherited tendencies have hardly to be counted with. The child seems to be born amenable to outward circumstances, and has more inclination to do what the Frenchman called "stay put" than to strike out in any course of its own. Such

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children may be easy to train, they are not, however, so interesting as those babies who, from the time they notice anything, would convince the most unbelieving that they are indeed persons. These latter are often called "wilful," and spoken of as having "wills of their own." What they have are strong passions, strong desires, an appreciation of desirable objects, a quick intelligence, and so on. When these abound there is all the more need to train the will which must finally manage and control everything. In proportion to the more abounding vitality of intellect will, most likely, be the strength of temptation. Especially happy is such a child if, when he comes to fight his own battles with his natural tendencies, he finds them already under the guidance of some habits of control. I do not say that the task of the parents of such a child is not an especially difficult one, but, if rightly carried out, it will have its reward.

Perhaps one may here point out that in adult life the person described as "wilful" is generally he who is *without a real power of will*. His passions and desires succeed each other according to circumstances, generally merely following the lead of associated ideas, and may be described as controlling *him*, than he *them*. Even when he knows that he *ought* to get the mastery over an inclination to wrong he has not the power to turn his thoughts into another channel. His hand is not on the helm of his own life.

When we come to consider the life history of the growing character of a human being it divides itself roughly, but naturally, into periods, in a way which is really most helpful to a study of its needs. Anyone with practical experience of children will realise that in the average child (one hates the expression, for of course there is no such thing in existence as the "average child") the time from birth to somewhere in the fourth year, or rather earlier, constitutes a well-marked period, from that time till about twelve another, and from then to adult life a third. These divisions are not hard and fast, they always overlap in every child, and if such a thing were possible they would probably vary with the same child in different surroundings. All individuals develope [sic] differently and at a different rate. For the practical purposes of the present paper these periods are obvious and useful, and each broadly calls for a different kind of help from those

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around the child. They are each characterised by certain things, and each bears its own special part in, and has special dangers for the growing character.

The first few years of life constitute a period of enormous physical and intellectual activity. In them the newborn baby becomes the little boy or girl of three or four, and not only learns to walk, talk at least one language (often more), performs many complex actions with his hands, but has, in a higher sense, to realize the whole world which surrounds him, and gather every moment new information through all his five senses. In short, a human being accomplishes more in this time than in any other three years of his whole life afterwards. External impressions pour in during every waking hour, and the busy intellect and developing physical powers have hard work to keep pace with it all. One thing nature does not demand of him is that the child, during the earlier part of this time, should busy himself with morals or be responsible for the exercise of a will over which he has not, as yet, got control. What I shall presently try to show you is, that during this very early part of life all this is the business, not of the child himself, but of those who have the charge of him.

In the second period (three or four to about twelve) the child learns to think more consecutively about the things which during the first years he had realized, and to comprehend more definitely the why and wherefore of them. During this time he takes gradually into his own hands the management of much of his own conduct. That he may do this early and safely will alway [sic] in great part be due to our having rightly done our part towards him in earlier years. Our task is not yet finished, but it is in many ways different, and that we should keep our eyes open to this as development goes on is of the greatest importance. Of the third or growing up years I shall not speak to-day. My business this morning will be almost entirely with the first few years of life.

I have said that in each period of growth those about a child have a certain place to fill, whether it be by acting or standing aside. The fact of the existence of the Parents' Union shows that we here at least assume as much. We exist as a Union for the furtherance of that aspect of education which

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more especially deals with the development of character, and we hold as one of our articles of faith, that habits, either formed or prevented, play a large part in this work. We are agreed that the greater part of the common acts of daily life ought to be made habitual, and that anything which the Devonshire peasant would describe as "behaviour" being established as habit, leaves the individual freer to give attention to the larger interests of life. We all wish children to enter upon the second period of life with nice table manners, cleanly tidy habits, a pleasant way of speaking, punctuality and neatness, and a whole string of daily virtues which it would take too long to enumerate.

In her delightful book on the mind of a child, Mrs. Ennis Richmond has said, "There is at the outset one most helpful and delightful reflection with regard to the education of little children. Teaching a child to do right is in itself teaching it not to do wrong." Again: "From the moment that a child lives he is a person, and he must either go forwards or backwards: the entrance of life precludes standing still."

These are two big truths. If you want to keep out evil, put in good. The evil is not there till you let it grow, though its possibilities may be; and the infant from its birth is a person to be respected, and is either going forward in the path of right living or sowing the whirlwind for

itself or others in the time to come.

We often find it hard to believe in the existence of the little seeds of undesirable habits in a young child, and to realise that many small actions, which at first seem only pretty and intelligent, if allowed to be repeated and continued in, will presently appear as grave or at least inconvenient faults. By the time we recognise them as such we have generally lost the right moment for preventing them, and their eradication becomes a long, clumsy, artificial process, as different as possible from the beautifully natural method of their prevention, which should be used on their first appearance, and to the possibility of which every parent and nurse ought to be alive.

Commonly we let a fault grow, and then try to stamp it out by punishment, when only for our ignorance and laziness, the thing would never have grown beyond the proportions of a danger signal. The truth is that long before a child is

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capable of managing its will, we ought to be laying down lines of good habits in its character, lines which as soon as ever he is ready to take over the government of his own life, in however small a degree, he will find as the directions of least resistance.

We have just spoken of letting faults grow, and then trying to eradicate them. Have you not noticed that a most fertile garden for the growth of these weeds of bad habit exists during what I have called the first period of a child's life? It is at about four, when the "attractive baby" is turning into the "troublesome child," that so many parents wring their hands and say: "What am I to do with Tommy, he is so disobedient?" "I wonder how Willie *can* be so selfish?" "Why is Mary so greedy?" "How is it best to get rid of these faults?" How, indeed? These weeds have grown in the night while you slept, dreaming that while baby is so little nothing can make much difference. Tommy was so high-spirited, it was funny to see him do one thing when he was told to do another. Willie was such a pet one had to give him everything he asked for. "You should see how Mary goes for the chocolate-box the moment she toddles into the drawing-room."

"But what," say these parents, "ought one to have done?" The first time Tommy shewed signs of disobedience one ought to have recognised them as such; seen that Willie acted generously instead of selfishly; that Mary's attitude towards food was from the first healthy.

If we can really do much of this, and from the first prevent wrong *conduct*, by seeing that the children *do* rightly long before they can have the power of will to control their own conduct, we shall be astonished how few faults there will be to punish by the time we come to that critical fourth year. Furthermore, as soon as the children are old enough to begin the management of their own conduct they will find it a *comparatively* easy matter to walk along the right path. Their moral enemies will, we may venture to say, seem fewer and weaker than they would otherwise have been.

Now we, of the Parents' Union, hold that all parents and nurses have in their hands a means for the accomplishment of this. A power which, if rightly used, will bring about right conduct, and thus prevent the beginnings of wrong

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conduct from taking place. We know that if in our own lives we would prevent wrong action we must get rid of wrong thoughts. That an inclination to mean actions disappears, not before "I won't," "I won't," but before a high ideal of right which makes "I will" impossible. It costs us adults no small effort, backed by judgment and understanding, to turn our thoughts in this way,

and to the end of life we are often full of gratitude to some friend who, in the difficult moment, helps us to do it. We see that before the child has anything of the nature of a trained will we must be such a friend to him and must play the part of a will for him. Before he knows good from evil we must choose good for him and see that he does it. Traces of the path of Duty are in this way marked out in the brain-cells long before that robust goddess can be expected to walk along it in broad daylight. When she comes she ought not to have to begin by engaging in earthworks, or be overwhelmed by floods against which dams and dykes should long ago have been put up.

We have already said more than once that our actions are an outcome of our thoughts. And we have seen that whatever *will* may be, and whatever its relation to thought, we observe practically that in proportion as a human being has the power of controlling his thoughts, he has power of will. Also that the power of thought control really means the power of *turning the thoughts*, just as the control of a vessel means power to turn a helm. In later life, as I have said, we ought all to be able to turn our own thoughts from evil to good and so bring about right action, yet many of us are, as we have said, grateful for outside help in the matter. For the little child this must always be done by others, and it is only as it is wisely and rightly accomplished for him that the first beginnings of faults of character can be prevented, and right conduct make choice of right actions easy in the future. During the first years of life he has no power of turning or controlling his thoughts. He dwells but a short time on anything and quickly flits from interest to interest as is suggested by the external world of things which, as we already have said, he is at the time busy taking in and realising.

The young child tends in the main to be good, and to do

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what he is bid, and in large measure to respond to the *real* expectations of the people around him. But to his bright, intelligent observation life is full of temptation. Some day, suddenly, he fails to be obedient, puts himself for a moment in the opposition, and that is the critical time when we must step in and help. Here the wise mother recognises first of all how little the opposition means. Nothing but a momentary whim. She gives a moment or two of wise neglect, and then turns his thoughts to a new aspect of the thing the baby has been told to do. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred this will be done at once. One knows how passing are the mental states of a young child, and that nothing makes a very deep impression unless it is artificially rubbed in; the thing to do when the little seed of evil appears is to avoid giving it too much importance and marking it in the child's consciousness by talk or opposition. The wise mother does not dwell upon the difficulty, and before the child knows it, turns him into the path of right action. This treatment we call "thought-turning."

Let me give a few instances. Some day baby won't eat his food: it has struck him at the moment that it is a nice play to shut his mouth tight, and blow out his cheeks just when the spoon or cup is approaching his mouth. Here is a first suggestion of naughty table-manners. If now we tell him it is naughty and wrong, and not to be done, he may or may not understand, he may or may not obey, but we may be certain that his brain-cells will remember the fun and the attention his little trick has elicited, and he will try the same another time, and then another, so beginning the formation of an ugly habit. If, however, we take no notice, but talk of something else, of something he saw out walking, of what the pussy has done, or of some fine play he has had with his toys, baby's attention turns at once in another direction, and the

mouth receives the food gratefully. So a certain amount of wholesome food is got down at the proper rate, and we establish an understanding with a healthy stomach, and lay the foundation of a good digestion which will stand by the child in after life. When later it comes into his own hands to decide what he will eat, drink and avoid, his choice will be made on the basis of a habit of wholesome regular feeding. If, instead
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of treating the matter this way we try and persuade and coax, offering him this when he will not eat that, baby is brought into the field of choice before he has knowledge enough to choose. We encourage the beginnings of meaningless likes and dislikes, and fidgetty ways about food, and even of dyspeptic habits.

Another instance. Perhaps baby has had his bath, and nurse is beginning to dress him. He says, "No," he will go on with a delightful game begun when in his bath towel. Coax, persuade or scold, and the same difficulty will crop up again to-morrow. Say, "Let me see, which arm did we think we would put in first?" and the toilette goes merrily forward. Another brick has been put into the edifice of right habit, by another tiny piece of right action. Again, it is bedtime and baby does not want to go up to the nursery [sic] A little talk about any other subject, and then—"Which of us will get first to the foot of the stairs?" or something of the same kind gets the thing done. Or, a little child shows a tendency to outbursts of temper which tend to arise from the merest trifles. The watchful parent or nurse should be able to see by many little signs when these are coming on. They should first of all avoid as far as possible the kind of occasion which it is noticed produces them, and if this is impossible and the storm seems about to break, send the child a message, or give it some interesting occupation, or ask some arresting question before it itself knows that the temper is coming. It is remarkable how, in response to the turn of thought, the clouds will clear away.

In all these cases we avoid certain bad habits by forming certain good ones. This in very early times we intentionally do, without any appeal to reason, or any call upon conscious will. Because at one-and-a-half or two, we cannot depend upon a person having material to reason with so as to make a right choice, and we know that he has not the power to turn his own thoughts from temptation. His thoughts, as we have said, are momentary, they flit from object to object without control. He is busy looking out at life and taking in everything in succession. Life is one panorama from morning to night. When a young child, living life as it should live it, happily and without responsibility, looks you in the face and says he won't do a thing, just try to realize that it is a passing
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whim to be wiped out by the next interest. Don't mark the occasion with talk and opposition, "That is naughty," "You must not," or appeal too cheaply to his strongest emotions by saying, "Do it to please mother," don't in short bring a sledge hammer to crack a hazel nut, but just try change of thought. A baby of eighteen months had much better not know too much about what "naughty" means, and will very likely feel it fun to do what it must not, but it will be a great help to its thoroughly understanding these things in the future if it now does the thing it ought to do.

Believe me, the thing that really matters at this stage of life is that the child *do the right thing in the right way*, eat his supper, put on his clothes, go to bed, not lose his temper.

This steady laying down of habits through repeated right conduct is to later will control

what the perpetual small restless movements of a young infant lying on its mother's knee are to the purposeful movements of a later time. They pave the way and make the other easier as soon as the central nervous system is ready to guide.

See, without fuss, that a young child is tidy and it will soon delight in tidiness, see that it obeys and you will later find it obedient.

Then I hear someone say, "But isn't all this an insult to an intelligent child?"

It is no more an insult than feeding him with a spoon before he can hold the spoon himself, or carrying him before he can walk. When the time comes that he has learnt to walk (by *walking*, mind you, not by *being told to*) we don't carry him, and we do not insult the boy of six by feeding him with a spoon. As soon as we feel that the individual child can understand "No," say it about the more important things which are to be avoided, but if you do and it is not enough, you must be prepared to do his thought-turning for him, and not call him naughty because he cannot do it for himself. We can draw no hard and fast line and say that on such-and-such a day of such a month any child can do so-and-so. The watchful parent or nurse will recognise the signs when the time comes. Once a child is old enough to realize that in any department he is being managed, it is too late to manage him in that department. The chances are that by that time, if we have done our part wisely, he will be well able to manage himself. When the day comes that you

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can say to the little boy about anything, with a certainty of being understood, "When you feel tempted to do anything you ought not to do, just think of something else, or go and do something else," he has entered on the second stage of his life. He will often need help from others in his thought-turning, but as soon as possible show him how, in many instances, to do it for himself. A very young child can be taught that in the presence of a temptation to do something forbidden, the best plan is to go and do something else which is also pleasant, but allowable. This of course presupposes a knowledge of right and wrong, of allowed and forbidden, of which every child is capable long before it has the power to act upon its knowledge.

Critical moments will always be arising when a new idea strikes across the line of what seemed a well-formed habit, and one may be tempted to feel for a moment that all one's work was in vain. In these cases, however, the new idea is probably, as I have said before, a very transitory one and refers more to some little detail of the habitual action than to the action itself. Let me tell of an instance to illustrate what I mean. A little boy of one-and-a-half to two years old, who greatly delighted in his bath, was in the habit of coming out of it genially and smilingly the moment he was told. The same proceedings were always gone through. After the real washing there was always a happy moment of splashing while nurse got ready the bath towel. Then she said, "Now sir! now sir! I am coming!" and out he came laughing and still enjoying himself on to her knee. It was lovely to see the end of such joy so joyously borne. One day, however, the new idea came in. The little boy thought he would not and the "I am coming" met with a refusal. I can't remember what nurse said or did just now, but she was greatly discouraged and said, "What after all is the good of habit?" But a wise friend said, "Habit is strong, but the new idea for the moment is stronger," and the baby's mother decided that for a few days no order should be given. In this way no opportunity for disobedience occurred, and the little boy was just lifted out while a cheerful and interesting conversation was kept up on all

kinds of topics. Very soon he responded to the order as before, and as promptly stopped play and came out the moment he was told.
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A little boy, rather older than this last, was told one day by his nurse, his mother being present, to run into the next room and ask a servant for a special reel of cotton that was in a special place. Generally he went happily to carry a message, but this time he refused, said it was too hard, and almost cried. Both mother and nurse attempted to make the message clear, but with small success. He shewed signs of obstinacy and "stiff back" over it so the mother took the boy out with her to the head of the stairs and spoke of other things. When he came back into the nursery he was asked, "Have you brought the cotton?" and he went happily to fetch it.

Now someone here is, I am sure, saying, "But that was not prompt obedience. Ought we not to teach our children prompt obedience?" Yes, we ought, and though these are not instances of prompt obedience, I contend that they are of the way to get it later on.

Let us look for a moment at the common way of treating a refusal to carry a message on the part of a parent or nurse, who has the sense to know that in right bringing up an order once given ought to be obeyed. The child refuses to go. Nurse, after more or less coaxing, says, "You must." The child begins to look stubborn and cries. Nurse says, "It's no use crying, here I stay and there you stay till it is done," or "Sit in that corner till you make up your mind to go." Most likely the nurse conquers, but only after a hard battle, which leaves in the mind of the child a sense of soreness and injustice, and creates such an episode as we would most wish to avoid. I ask you, *is this prompt obedience either?* In the thought-turning method, spoken of above, the brain impression will probably be simply that made by the action of going the message, in the latter way there must certainly be impressed upon the brain something likely to be the beginning of a habit of disobedience or sulkiness, or some other bad thing.

From the very earliest time most babies will respond to "ought" and "must" from those people who really mean it, and while in their presence. They are, however, quick to detect weakness of will, and like the Israelites, who could not obey Moses when he was no longer present with them, young children are not often influenced by an order when the personality is no longer behind it. A tiny child may
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understand "No," and that a thing ought not to be done, but just because he cannot control his own thoughts (practically cannot turn his own thoughts), this will not withhold him from the doing. *E.g*., some pretty ornament or plant is within his reach. He longs to touch it, but is told not to. Mother says it is a "No," and at the moment he understands as well as she does what a "No" is. If it has not yet occurred to him to disobey, her presence may keep him from it. Most likely it won't, but it may. Mother goes away and someone else comes in,—say an aunt or a friend who does not know nor care whether he touches the forbidden object. Baby is still quite clear it is "No." In fact he probably shows the tempting object to the new comer, and tells her it is a "No." All this time his thoughts and attention are dwelling on it. It fascinates him more and more: he comes nearer and nearer. Temptation is too much. He touches the ornament, takes it in his hand, and very likely, even at that moment, again cheerfully says that it is a "No."

From this instance, and from many others, it is plain that a child understands what is right and wrong; what "may" and "may not" mean long before he is able to act upon the knowledge. It is not uncommon to hear a little thing of three, or younger, sententiously advising

and reproving his elder sisters and brothers to and from the paths of virtue and those of wickedness, when we know that he himself could not, against a slight temptation, act up to what he is advising. Perhaps in this he is not unlike many older people who know very well what course their neighbours ought to follow, but are not so successful in guiding their own lives! By the child who touched the ornament, the intellectual meaning of the word “No” was perfectly understood, but no more than the drunkard could he turn his thoughts away from the strong temptation.

There are a few points which, if remembered, will make it easier to give this help to young children. First of all, a habit on your part of chatting now and then to the baby about the things around it, which are sure to interest it, and which its intelligence drinks in greedily, gives it a habit of attending to the spoken word, and makes it far easier to turn thought readily when the occasion arises. The child who is talked to even before it understands anything (just like the [p 539]
cat or dog who is conversed with frequently) looks up readily when addressed and gives its whole attention at once, even if only for a moment. The child whose mother or nurse seldom addresses it, except to give an order (the world is full of children so treated), gives slow attention to the spoken word, and is not easy to recall from the vague panorama of passing impressions. Again, when you want to tell a child to do something, remember not only that example is better than precept, but that precept may be brought wonderfully into line with example. Instead of “Willie, shut the door,” say, “Willie” (be sure he looks at you and gives his attention), “we always shut the door, don’t we?” and so on.

Have I spoken too much as if I thought this thought-turning was something to be done once for all, a magic spell which would work without failure? No, indeed, it is not. It needs a constant alertness and ingenuity. There will be much repetition of the same difficulties, which will frequently need new ideas to meet them. Besides, the ways of thought-turning which we need for an infant first taking notice are not what we shall require for even the same child at a year old, by eighteen months it will be different, and by two years different again. Every day brings new difficulties for the watchful eye to detect, new ideas required to meet them. All through life the power of giving anyone a helpful turn of thought will depend upon tact, love, and insight into the character with which one is at the moment dealing.