A TALK TO NURSES ON "THE CHILD AS A PERSON."

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Anyone here who has read *Adam Bede*, by George Eliot (and I expect many have done so), will remember how much good Mrs. Poyser at the Hall Farm objected to a family of children

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being all as much alike as so many dip candles. Most of us, I am sure, are thankful that few such families exist. I wonder there really are any?

Even if in one household four or five children may resemble one other in looks, and general deportment, helped by their clothes being all cut alike, it is, after all, only an *outside* likeness. They may look just the same to strangers, but all who are really acquainted with them, and who know the family well, would tell you that those children are really ever so different from each other; in short, they would know that each one is a *Person* with his and her own views, and tastes and opinions and in no danger at all of mixing himself up with his brothers and sisters! No one knows better than the Nurse that the treatment which suits John won't suit Peter, that if you want to manage Maggie you have to take her quite differently from the way you take Mary, and that Lucy is easily amused, while Kate would wear you out in an hour.

The fact is that each child comes into this world an independent being. As soon as he has developed senses capable of feeling, seeing and hearing, he at once begins forming links, on his own account, between himself and the whole world around him, and shows himself as intelligent, or often much more intelligent, than the grown-up people he lives among. He is ready to observe, and notice and reason and draw his own conclusions from everything he sees and hears, but as yet he is very ignorant, and extremely credulous, and just for these very reasons, if for no others, he puts us on our honour to be truthful and honest in all our dealings with him. He comes from he knows not where, and he has entered a road which leads he knows not whither. All life is before him, and the whole is of breathless interest. To quote from Miss Mason's "Children as Persons," a paper we ought all to read, she says: "We can remember quite well the time when all children were to us 'golden boys and girls'; when there was a glamour over trees and houses, men and women; when stars and clouds and birds were not only delights, but possessions; when every effort of strength or skill, the throwing of a stone or the wielding of a brush, was a delight to behold and attempt; when our hearts and arms were stretched out to all the world, and loving and smiling seemed to us the natural behaviour of everybody.

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"As for possessions, what a joy was a pebble or a cork, or a bit of coloured glass, a marble or a bit of string! The glamour of its first invention lay upon everything we saw and touched. God and the angels, men and women, boys and girls, the earth and the sky, all belonged to us with an ineffable sense of possession."

Centuries ago we were told not to offend or put stumbling blocks in the way of little children, and it is advice we all do well to bear in mind at the present-day.

The child who asks many questions sometimes leads us into sad temptations. We may not know the answers and we may not like to confess it. Or the questions may be what some people call "awkward questions," which we don't know how best to answer, and so from want of courage we may resort to untruths in order to get out of a difficulty.

I know that some people think it all right to tell what is not true to a child. "*Oh! he is*

only a child," they say. But just because he is a child, reaching out intelligently to catch hold of the real facts about the world in which he finds himself, we ought to think of him with the utmost reverence, and see that we supply him with truth which he, in his trusting faith, looks to us to give him. It is only so that the links, which I have said he is forming with everything about him, can be trustworthy, reliable and strong, fit to bear the stress of later life.

There are some characteristics which the least observant of us must have noticed are apt to be especially strongly marked in nearly all little children, and I should like this evening to take just three of these and show you what great powers they are in the life and growth of character. They are so just because they help these new and eager persons to put themselves into relation with the world in which they are to live. They help to make a kind of scaffolding by means of which character grows, or perhaps I should say, they direct the lines of growth by which the intelligent ignorant child becomes the useful capable man or woman full of knowledge, but still with an appetite for more.

They are characteristics which of course, in a more subdued form we all carry through life.

(1) All healthy children are apt to be full of *Curiosity*. They long to know and hear all about everything which comes

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under their notice. They investigate it with their fingers, look at it with their eyes, and, when very young, even put it into their mouths experimentally. In short they are very *Curious*.

(2) Children instinctively imitate the actions and doings of the grown-up people with whom they live. *They are strongly Imitative*.

(3) If children have once seen a thing done one way, or heard something related in one form, it is apt to be torture to them to see it done differently, or hear it told differently another time. *They are true Conservatives*.

Too often all these really deep-rooted and useful tendencies which may be said to be nearly common to all children, are regarded by those around them as just their "tiresome ways," and treated with contempt as being of no real consequence. As a matter of fact, they are all of great importance, and are indications of ways in which we can help the building up character, and establish principle in these persons whom circumstances have trusted in our hands.

Curiosity is often spoken of as if it were always a bad thing, whereas, it is in its right place and form one of the best of good things. Healthy *curiosity* is nothing but *the appetite of the mind for knowledge*, just as hunger is the appetite of the body for food.

We all love to see the children hungry at meal-times. We delight in giving them good helpings of food which will make the body grow, and lengthen and strengthen the limbs. We ought to be just as ready and joyful to give food to their active minds, which are reaching out everywhere for knowledge to make them also grow stronger and wider.

Let us think for a moment how we should feel if children were hungry for food for their bodies, and asked us for it, and we saw them weak and badly thriven for need of it, and yet we had none to give them, and no money with which to buy it.

I have known poor mothers in that position, so miserable and anxious and sad for their children, that it drove them to be almost angry with the poor little things for wanting the bread, which it was not in their power to give them.

Don't you think we are sometimes a little like this when children come to us wanting to know things, and asking a hundred questions about matters concerning which we are

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ignorant and therefore have no information to give them? At the present moment I know a quite nice kind woman who has come heartily to dislike a very good little niece of hers who is living with her, just because the child asks so many questions which the aunt is unable to answer. It makes her quite nervous, she says, wondering what question will come next. And the worst of it is that they are not really difficult questions, but such as almost anyone ought to be able to answer, if they kept their eyes open and their thoughts alive.

The fact is that we are apt to have our own heads full of what children would call "dull grown-up things," like dress and gossip, and so forth, that we have ceased to wonder at, and feel interested in much larger and wider questions, such as how the plants grow, and the sun rises, what the stars are, how the birds build their nests, the lives of tadpoles, and the ways of the chickens and animals. We may even have ceased to be able to grow excited over a good fairy-tale! This being so, of course, we have not got the bread of knowledge to offer when the children ask for food for their active intelligent minds, and thus our own poverty may make us cross and impatient.

A few years ago a learned man wrote a delightful book called *I Wonder*. He dedicated it to his little grand-daughter who was not then two years old. It was not, however, a child's book at all, but a book for growing-up young people, which pointed out to them how great a thing it is to keep alive in ourselves the power of wondering at all that is really wonderful, the habit of keeping our minds aware how much more there is in the world than we shall ever have time to know more than a very little about, even should we live to a green old age. The book is well worth reading, and makes one thoroughly ashamed of the way we let our minds become narrowed in, in the presence of the many beauties and wonders which lie all around us.

If then we want to understand children and do the very best possible for them, from day to day, we must retain through life our own humility, and so be able to sympathize with their healthy curiosity which it must never be forgotten is *hunger for knowledge*.

Just as bodily hunger will lead people who cannot get good and suitable food to eat unwholesome and unsuitable rubbish,
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so children whose minds are not supplied with wide and healthy interests, are sure to satisfy their curiosity on unsuitable things, which are not good for them.

Some people make the great mistake of talking of all curiosity as if it were only for what is unwholesome, instead of seeing in it a natural healthy appetite to be properly fed and encouraged. They are like the mother or nurse in *Punch*, I forget which it was, who said, "Go and see what Baby is doing, and tell him not to."

The second characteristic which I mentioned as strong in nearly all children is their *Imitativeness*. What they see the grown-up people do they are sure to imitate. We see this in all their plays. The children at the beginning of the last century used to pretend that the sofa was a stage coach, drawn by horses and go journeys in it, as their parents did in real coaches. In my childhood, sofas had ceased to be coaches. They had become trains, and engines, not horses drew them along. Now, besides being trains they are, not infrequently, motor cars careering over the roads all through the country. (And so the spirit of rush and hurry and breathless haste has invaded even the nursery.) Not only in plays but in everything else children tend to imitate everyone around them, and here the importance of Imitation touches closely that of Curiosity. If the people with whom children live, do not keep *their* interests, and *their* wonders fresh the children will soon become ashamed of

theirs, and make the mistake of thinking that they already know all about everything, and that there is nothing more to learn or to see. They will not of course, as a rule, lose their curiosity. The instinct is too strong in them to die so quickly. They will, however, become ashamed of their ignorance, the sense of which is really one of the great powers of their lives, and hide it away from the sight of the unsympathetic grown-up person. At the same time their curiosity will, in many cases, be turned into undesirable channels, and silly, false or useless knowledge become the diet upon which their minds feed.

It is not of the slightest use to say to children "you must not say this or that, because it is very wrong," or "you must never do so and so," if, all the time, we are ourselves doing, and thinking and saying the very things we forbid.

If ever there was a useless and wicked old saw it is one which
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was not uncommonly made use of to children when I was a child, "Do as I say, but don't do as I do." One might as well expect that if one bored a hole in the bottom of a tub of water, and told the water not to run out, it would be obedient enough to stay in.

Imitation is far more natural and instinctive in children than *Obedience*, and if we want them to be obedient (as we all do), we *must be obedient ourselves*, not only to the orders given us by those people for whom we work, but to our own principles, and to all that we know to be right and good, and the will of God. "Nursie, why do you so and so?" asked a little boy; "you *needn't*." "Because," answered Nursie, "I just *must* do it. It just has to be done," and the little boy got an idea there and then of responsibility and duty and the laws of living which stood by him years afterwards when he had to face difficulties and carry out arduous duties from which a naturally indolent man shrank.

In the excellent sermon some of us heard this morning, at the Chapel of the Ascension, Mr. Alexander Nairne quoted some preacher who was in the habit of saying "Mark, my brethren, how often in the Gospels we are told that Our Lord said '*I must*.'"

Those parents or nurses who do not themselves obey a higher law than their own fancy, *dare* not expect obedience from the children, for Imitativeness is one of the most certain and ineradicable forces by which habits and character grow.

The third strong characteristic of children to which I called your attention is what may be called their natural *Conservatism*. If a thing has been done or said in a certain way on one occasion, most young children feel strongly, that it is extremely important for it to be done the same way next time. Try to repeat the same story over again, and leave out, or put in, or alter some detail, or perhaps even some word, and see how you will be corrected, and scorned for your laxity and inaccuracy.

If the girl in the story wore a blue dress and white pinafore the first time we told about her, and we, thoughtlessly, dress her in red with a check pinafore the second time, or if we forget to mention the cuckoo clock which hung behind the door, or the little bushes in the garden on each side, as the fairy godmother walked up to the cottage door, be sure we shall hear of it, and be made to feel very small indeed.
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Or if a little child pays a visit in a house, where he comes to feel at home and familiar, and notices everything, with what joy he returns a few months later and looks for all the familiar things. Then what disappointment if anything is not as he remembered it. "Where is the chair that *always* stood in that corner?" or "You haven't got your *right* cups and saucers," if some others are in use. "May I use the mug with the flowers on it? I *always* had it before." Perhaps the former visit, which made so deep an impression on memory, had

only lasted a few days.

Now as *Curiosity* is an appetite for knowledge, and helps children to gain it from everything they meet, and *Imitation* leads them to act and speak like the people they live among, this *Conservatism* with its passion for accurate repetition, and for having things done in what is regarded as a *right* way instead of a *wrong* way, is one of the main forces which go to form *habits* of every kind.

Habit is said to be ten times stronger than Nature, and is chiefly formed in us by doing the same thing over and over again till it becomes easier and easier, and at last is done quite without effort, and almost without our being aware we are doing it. It is easy to see how Conservatism helps in this. If while a habit of any kind was forming, the thing was done one way one day, and another way another day, it would greatly lengthen the process and perhaps the habit might never be formed at all.

As the training of little children in nice ways nearly altogether depends upon ensuring good habits in everyday things; it is plain what a very important characteristic of childhood this Conservatism is.

There are also mental habits about which we have a great responsibility. These persons who are now children under our charge, will not be children very long. They will be only a short time in the Nursery, and before they have well realized their surroundings there, they will be passing into the School-room, and then on to the School and beyond it.

Let us be careful that each step of the road prepares for the next, that, instead of keeping them babies all the time they are in the nursery, we think of what is ahead of them. It will never do to let them go on to the next stage with much which has to be unlearnt. Unlearning what has grown into us and
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become habit, is always a bitter pain and not often a useful one.

Be full of sympathy with the interests of the children, and sympathize also with their sufferings when either pain or wrong-doing invades the nursery, but remember that sympathy is neither sickly sentimentality nor loud lamentation. Let us do all we can to relieve the pain of knocks and falls and bruises, and be more than tender and compassionate for poor little bewildered sick children. Let us remember, however, while relieving suffering to encourage bravery, and help the sufferer to see as far as possible the brighter side of misfortune.

Let us remember the truth that we are all so made that we cannot think of two things at the same time. If we have ever tried it we know that the most excruciating pain can be got rid of, for at least a moment or two, by resolutely thinking of something else, and that nothing is easier than to cultivate in ourselves a habit of getting rid of worries by turning our thoughts in some other direction.

It is well to think about misfortune as long as thought leads us to a way of remedying it, to sensible action which will help ourselves, or someone else, out of a trouble. When, however, letting our thoughts dwell on misfortune leads to nothing, thinking about it is only another name for worrying, which is a thing we all ought all to be ashamed to confess that we ever do.

It is quite common to hear people say almost proudly, “I am so worried about so and so,” when “so and so” is something quite outside their power to alter, and when they ought to blush to make such a confession. They should instead be turning their thoughts to something pleasanter, and making the world brighter instead of more dismal for those around them.

Little children cannot be expected to turn their own thoughts, but it ought to be wisely done for them by those who are with them. Then when they are older it must be explained to them, and they ought to be taught to do it for themselves.

There is a good old rhyme (I don't know where it comes from):—

"For every evil under the sun,
There is a remedy or there is none,
If there be one seek it and find it,
If there be none then never mind it."

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To each person who has sought the remedy for an evil, and is convinced no remedy exists, I recommend that of thought-turning as sure, except in the very most devastating troubles to give some relief.

In selecting these three characteristics which give us so much aid in helping children, I have endeavoured to give you a few principles upon which to work, principles which you can yourselves apply to many instances and occasions. I would, however, at the last remind you, that whatever your knowledge of principles or your experience in applying them may be, without *real love* for children, and reverence for that "divine spark" which is in every man who is born into this world, the principles will fail in their application. If we ourselves in humility can become as little children, we are fit companions for them. See the world through their clear eyes and, with your greater knowledge, you will be able to help them to set their feet upon the right paths.

"I come in the little things
Saith the Lord:
Not borne on morning wings
Of majesty, but I have set My Feet
Amidst the delicate and bladed wheat,
That springs triumphant in the furrowed sod.
There do I dwell in weakness and in power;
Not broken or divided, saith our God!
In your strait garden plot I come to flower.
About your porch My Vine
Meek, fruitful, doth entwine;
Waits, at the threshold, Love's appointed hour.

"I come in the little things,
Saith the Lord:
Yea! On the glancing wings
Of eager birds, the softly pattering feet
Of furred and gentle beasts, I come to meet
Your hard and wayward heart. In brown bright eyes
That peep from out the brake, I stand confest.
On every nest
Where feathery Patience is content to brood
And leaves her pleasure for the high emprize

Of motherhood—
There doth My Godhead rest."[1]

[1] *Immanence*, by Evelyn Underhill.