

## WHY SMALL THINGS MATTER.<sup>1</sup>

By the late HELEN WEBB, M.B. (Lond.).

EVERYONE must be agreed that we are living in most strenuous times. Must not those of us who are older frequently realise that the calls of to-day on our time and our nerve-power are greatly in excess of what were made upon our parents'? The calmest and best balanced are aware of an environment which makes it harder to concentrate attention, to work steadily; harder to keep our tempers, more difficult to sleep soundly, which in short renders us in every way less placid than were the folk in the time of our grandparents.

Life rushes; it seldom walks or trots quietly. Typewriters, telephones, motor-cars and aeroplanes tend to make people pack their days full to bursting, and many of us find that we are expected, with these aids, to get through as much in a day as former generations did in a week or more.

In such a milieu and with this stress bearing in from all sides, does it not behove us to stop and consider not only how we can put up suitable barriers for self-protection, but in what ways we can safeguard and strengthen the rising generation so that they may present a comparatively calm front to a world of increasing turmoil, and not go under in the conflict? ...<sup>2</sup>

As children get beyond infancy the same general principles should be observed; a sufficiency of good, nourishing, but simple food at regular hours, plenty of fresh air and exercise, and when possible life in the country instead of in town.

Do not over-stimulate; do not over-educate; and do not press the brain. See to the removal of all physical disabilities, such as adenoids, enlarged tonsils, errors of refraction in the eyes; defective teeth, etc., in short, anything which may interfere with brain action or nutrition.

There should be plenty of routine and a good deal of what may seem to us grown-up people, absolute monotony in the life of a child. The world is to him all new and interesting: there are quantities of thrilling things to be seen and observed and learnt, which to us may have become so familiar as to be nearly non-existent, unless we have children about us to keep us young. Little children ought not to have a chance of becoming blasé; they readily do if given too much artificial excitement, such as late or crowded parties, and cinema entertainments. Excitement which at all partakes of the nature of grown-up excitement is apt to be harmful, and there is plenty of the kind which they need always at hand in every day events.

There should be abundance of occupation and, at first, the more it is of the child's own finding the better. Let us never be in a hurry to supply Paris dolls to such a child as loves and makes an inseparable companion of, perhaps, an old stick with

[p 775]

a potato for a head, wrapped up in a discarded garment of its own.

Here imagination and ingenuity are at work, and original, independent action, which should be allowed to exercise themselves and will grow in the using.

One ought to respect the concentration and brown studies of children and not thoughtlessly interrupt serious occupations, the inwardness of which we do not understand. How often a little child, busily engaged in some undertaking, be it a building of bricks or making a mud pie, is suddenly seized upon, bundled up, and hustled off to what the grown-up person is well aware to be the much more important *next thing*. It was not only learning valuable facts of

life but practising attention and concentration, and so forming habits such as build grit into character. If the *next thing* is *really* important (a walk, or dinner or something of that kind) give due warning to begin putting up in time, and the child will have another lesson in life, instead of a shock and a jar.

Here we find ourselves in the midst of the question of habit, "That diminutive chain which is scarcely heavy enough to be felt till it is too strong to be broken," as it is described by Dr. Johnson.

Few things tend more to nervous stability in later life than the early formation of good and correct habits in small things.

The human being who in childhood has learnt to do mechanically all the minor details of everyday occurrence, has cleared from his path a mass of obstructive material, and gone far in the work of preparing his brain to endure without injury the worries and burdens of life.

Such mechanicalisation makes thousands of things easy which would otherwise be difficult. When they are habitual they need no attention and do not cause mental fatigue, which is an expensive output. The little child, for instance, who learns what in Devonshire is known as "behaviour" before self-consciousness comes upon him, is saved a multitude of wearing mortifications and difficulties as he grows bigger, and can later enjoy the interests around him instead of undergoing much real distress.

More than this, routine and repetition of actions which go to form habits have a specific steadying effect upon the nervous system. They increase co-ordination, improve its tone, and give poise. It is obvious that too much habit, *the making*

[p 776]

*habitual things which ought to be left to choice and attention*, tends on the other hand to give an excessive degree and a wrong kind of stability, lessens spontaneity and renders the individual unfit to cope with the new conditions which meet him in the calls of life. The man who has gone in one narrow round all his life, simply repeating without thought the same daily routine actions, may become in one sense so stable that nothing moves and nothing interests him. He is a mere machine. He acquires a stability which may be compared to that of a cube on a table. What we aim at, on the other hand, for the healthy brain of a living soul is the balanced stability, of the "loggan-stone," which, moved by the slightest touch, ultimately returns to equilibrium.

Amongst those habits to be cultivated are many negative ones. By this I mean, that those in charge of children should do all in their power to see that habits of mind and body detrimental to health and sanity are *not* formed. As an example of this, take the habit of screaming fits, not at all rare in emotional children. Such fits are terribly exhausting at the time, and are apt to result in more or less permanent weakening of the defences.

Though the permanent injury may be like that of the breaking of Sir Walter Scott's heart, "so well mended that one cannot find the scar," it is there nevertheless. For the young infant a certain amount of use of its lungs is useful and wholesome. It will cry when it is hungry, and from time to time express its disapproval of various experiences which it would prefer left alone. It will cry with pain, and it is well we should know about a pin or a stomach ache. No trouble should be spared to find the cause of such crying, if doubtful, but with its removal and the consequent relief from annoyance or suffering the baby at once should calm down and become happy again. Not so with the crying fits of the over-emotional infant. They are more

like the hysterics of an adult, and tend to repeat and prolong themselves, if timely efforts are not successful in putting a stop to the habit. If taken at the very beginning, change of thought wisely applied at each attempt at recurrence will often be successful, but when once the habit is established the problem becomes much more difficult.

When children waken out of sleep with such screaming it is often the result of some dream, the memory of which goes on  
[p 777]

terrifying the child, who cannot have the relief of explaining its trouble to those around it.

Closely allied to habit and most influential in the production of good nerve balance are all those muscular actions which necessitate precision. Every action which any group of muscles learns to perform skilfully goes towards the increase of co-ordination in the brain and establishes a healthier state. Physical exercises which are accurately performed and learnt with real attention, not only strengthen the muscles and improve the carriage, cause deep-breathing and consequent increase in the amount of oxygen which enters the blood, but they also cultivate those portions of the brain which are used in their performance and establish the co-ordination of one part with another. Fencing and all exercises of balance and precision have this effect to a particular high degree.

All delicate handicrafts in which interest is awakened, and accuracy sought after, are very effective in increasing co-ordination and balance of brain action.

No child should begin regular lessons very early, much less so the neurotic child. Up to five or six years old, it is, as a rule, much more wholesomely occupied with *things* than with books, and even then great care must be taken that the *mental food supplied is not in excess of the appetite which demands it*. Information will do no harm if it is really sought for and desired, for the mind to develop "needs knowledge as much as the body needs bread and milk."

Close observations of small objects such as is necessitated by attempts to learn to read, to sew, or to thread small beads, have a definitely injurious effect upon the eyes of young children. They modify the vision injuriously and not infrequently set up errors of refraction which continue through life. It may be long before these defects are found out and remedied by proper glasses, and in the meantime they are telling back injuriously on the general health of the child, and putting him at a disadvantage among his fellows. The anxiety of mere babies to learn is a desire best satisfied by reading to them and telling them stories and facts of interest which gratify the mental appetite and enlarge the child's horizon without doing it physical injury.

Training with young children should for the most part take the place of teaching and in forming all the good habits to which I have referred they will of necessity receive many new  
[p 778]

ideas. It is delightful to learn to help nurse or mother in all kinds of little ways which teach deftness and tidiness, and one thousand other useful habits. To put away one's toys nicely, fetch and carry, and give messages accurately all form the most valuable kind of education at this time of life.

Everything round him is entering into every fibre of a child, and each day he adds to his knowledge of the common things of the world. What a multitude they are, and what a full life he lives as he realises them in those early years! As Walt Whitman puts it:—

“There was a child went forth every day,  
And the first object he looked upon,  
    that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day,  
    or a certain part of the day,  
On for many years, or stretching cycles of years.”

The higher functions of the emotional child ought to be retarded rather than stimulated. Ultimately, they will be all the stronger and healthier for such treatment. No parent ought to be beguiled by the early quickness of the unprotected, excitable child into letting him be pressed forward or even allowed to work up to his apparent powers. Especially, if the heredity is bad, this very precocity may even be a danger signal.

Of the highest moment, in establishing a right rhythm of life, are the moral, social and religious surroundings to which the individual is subjected. First of these as to time, and perhaps also in importance, come the parents themselves, their relations towards each other, their religious outlook, and the general tone of the home. In the earlier part of this paper, I quoted the saying that children should be careful in the choice of their parents. May I now say that the parents should be very careful in their choice of each other.

The more neurotic they are, the more careful should this choice be. One dwells on this because peace in the home and loyalty of one parent to the other, in every department of life, as well as in direct relation to their children, is an element of the atmosphere which cannot be over-estimated. The absence of what someone has called the *psychological unit* in the relation of father and mother is among the most disastrous calamities which can befall a young family. It is best that the parents should in all things see eye to eye, but for them not to be quite loyal to each other and not each uphold the authority of the other is a nervous strain which falls with intolerable weight on

[p 779]

sensitive and emotional children. We often say that the first principle in the inculcation of obedience is that children should feel that we ourselves are obedient to a higher law. In the same way they become loyal by recognising loyalty between those dear to them. If the father and mother have to settle some question on which they cannot at first agree, let the understanding be come to behind closed doors and not in the presence of the children. The young and emotional need round them the peaceful atmosphere which this ensures.

In a charming book, probably known to some here, *The Young People by one of the Old People*, the question is touched upon most delicately.

“Father and Mother work for love of the young people, and the young people watch and share the work, and lighten it and give it the touch of comedy. They are delightful. ‘I wish,’ said one of them, ‘that we had a little more—I don’t mean much more. I don’t want to alter the way we are doing things now. I know mother is awfully good—you know you are, mother—and father is awfully clever—of course you are, father—I only mean we could do such a lot of awfully jolly things, I don’t mean only for ourselves!’ But it was the way she said it, with a laugh and a nod to me, and a hand given to father, and a hand given to mother. She made us all sure we had all we wanted.

She had seen that father was in one of his moods, and in immediate need of that assurance, and the young people are wonderfully loyal to father. This loyalty which is a good instance of the divine management of human affairs, is hard to define. It is neither pride nor instinct, nor a sense of duty, nor ignorance of the facts of the case, nor a natural desire to make the best of them. I can only say that it would not be there if father and mother did not deserve it should be there. They get it to grow and flower and be in flower like the gorse all the year round. Out of the nettles of criticism they pluck the flower of loyalty. I think well of the nettles and not ill, and would not have them away. The young person who never judges his or her parents will always be misjudging them; and if I were in want of children of my own, I would as soon adopt a gramophone as such a child. This home-grown flower, the young people's loyalty, which we used to call filial piety, is very fastidious in its choice of soil, and very sensitive to changes in the atmosphere of home. I have observed it closed and drooping in the afternoon, because father at lunch-time had said to mother, 'I wish to goodness you would not do that!' but by dinner-time it was as fresh as ever, and father gathered some which mother wore all the evening."

Whatever be the creed of the parents, it is good for the children that, while firmly and reverently held, it is imbued with a wide tolerance for the views of others. How many young people have met with moral shipwreck simply as the result of a too narrow and rigid atmosphere in the home, which drove them to the other extreme. Religious instruction should be given reverently in peaceful surroundings, not hurried through or conducted at a time subject to interruption.

It is well that the children should associate this teaching

[p 780]

with moments of confidence, when they can open their hearts quietly to their mother and have an opportunity for discussing with her problems and difficulties of any kind which happen to be engaging their attention.

The making of friends (one of the most momentous influences of life) is an especially serious matter in the case of young people of the unrestrained emotional type. For this reason it behoves parents to exercise all possible care as to with whom their children associate.

It is generally impossible to choose the individual friends, for the growth of real friendship is a personal matter—a kind of fate which comes to each human soul and depends on lines of character and attraction which no outsider can judge—and in this sense, a father or mother is an outsider.

Parents, however, can by the choice of schools, and of the families with whom they associate do much to see that their children are brought into contact, for the most part, with those who are worthy of choice. They can spread the table, though each child for himself must select his individual food. Indeed, by the time the chief friendships of life, to say nothing of closer bonds, come to be made, character is so formed and the lines of cleavage in the individuality so established that our children have passed beyond the region to which I now chiefly refer.

There is literally no end to this subject, from any side, be it fact or theory for speculation, and I have only touched on a very few points.

---

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted from the *Parents' Review*, January, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> A section of the original article containing dated medical advice has been removed from this transcription by the Charlotte Mason Poetry team.