IF I COULD BEGIN AGAIN.

BY MRS. H. C. CRADOCK.

TO give advice, unasked, to a young mother, is a hazardous undertaking. She needs to be very humble and largeminded to take it kindly, and to profit by it. But she will often *read* it, and listen to it at public meetings, when she would chafe against it if given privately. That is easy to understand. When she reads a book about the training of children, or about anything else that concerns her as a mother, she knows that it is not meant specially for her—there is nothing personal in it, and her vanity and self-love and pride are not up in arms. But advice *is* often sought, nevertheless, and eagerly and pathetically sought, by the young. But always they go for it to those who never offer it unasked—to those who feel themselves least fitted to give it.

May I, a mother 'getting on in life,' at the risk of being thought egotistical, say what I *think* I should do if I could begin again? I am old enough now to look back and see what mistakes I have made, and yet young enough to remember vividly my own youth, and humbly to hope that I am still able to keep in touch with young lives to-day. So let me give advice unasked, and break for once my own strict rule!

There are so many things that I would do differently were I to begin again, that it is hard to know where to begin; and I shall certainly find it hard to know where to stop! Not all the faults and follies that I shall mention were committed by me—some were my neighbours'!

To get to work then.

I would try to remember that almost all the work of *training* is done indirectly. We think, in the foolishness of youth, that it is done by talking, and we learn as we grow more experienced

that talking has very little to do with it. We have become rather tired of the word *atmosphere* of late years; but we cannot get away from the fact of its importance. It is almost everything. An atmosphere of love and joy and reverence and prayer will do more in the home than any amount of *telling*. We have thought too much that telling and teaching are synonymous terms. Indeed they are not. Again, we are weary of hearing at Mothers' Union meetings that "what we are is of more importance than what we say." But we must not let the wearisome iteration of this truth blind us to its value. We need to have it graven deep on our hearts. For, of course, it is *we* who make the atmosphere. All the new psychological learning of the day only brings home to us once more the truth of the old copy-book adage that example is better than precept.

"I do not remember anything my mother *said* to me about reverence," said a good man; "but *her* reverence, as she knelt beside me in prayer when I was a child—that was what taught and helped me."

"Don't say things," said Emerson. "What you *are* stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary."

Yes, we who are mothers must get this lesson off by heart. We are training the members of our households by our own lives. How many things have gone wrong from our failure to recognise this fact. We can see it as we look back—we who are past middle life, and have failed so often in our dealings with the young. I do not mean that we must "be good" in order to influence others; indeed we shall inevitably fail if we set out to do that, for

the conscious setting of an example has something priggish in it, and has an irritating effect on the young, who are so extraordinarily quick in finding one out! They will probably want to do "just the opposite!" It is the *unconscious* influence which has so much power. So it amounts to this—if I were a young mother, with young children growing up round me, I would try to remember that it is eminently "worth while" taking great pains with my own spiritual life; that my gentleness and joy and sweet temper and unselfishness were vitally important things.

Secondly, if I could begin again, I would strive to shut my eyes more. We are so apt to be seriously distressed by little things which we take for grave symptoms, but which are only *phases* in a child's life. A lively baby who had reached the
[p 614]
great age of one year, would *not* sit properly in its perambulator, but insisted on facing the wrong way, kneeling up on its seat the better to see the enchanting world.

"Le it," said a wise counsellor to the worrying mother, "it won't want to keep jumping up all its life." Have we not often noticed how good children are with men? A man does not notice the little things which annoy a woman; he is blind to the 'phases' which will die a natural death if let alone. Of course there must be corrections sometimes, and direct admonition; but not very much of either. The boy of ten who listens unmoved to what seems to us a very pathetic tale, will not necessarily grow up a hard-hearted man; the reserved boy of sixteen who does not care to talk about religion to his mother may yet become a truly religious man.

So let us not be over-much troubled by 'phases' which are but stages in growth.

Thirdly, I would try hard not to confuse a child's mind and conscience by scolding for the wrong kind of things, e.g., for clumsiness and awkwardness and fidgetiness. To break a valuable piece of china is no more 'naughty' than to break a penny mug, yet one would think it were sometimes!

Fourthly, I would hardly ever talk about a child in his presence. It is not considered good manners to talk about a 'grown-up' if he is in the room, and politeness forbids it also in the case of a child. This seems too obvious to need saying. But experience teaches that it *does* need saying, and that very badly. To discuss children's doings and sayings in their presence is almost always harmful; it makes a shy child more shy and self-conscious, and in any case it makes him feel important, and that is not a feeling we wish to encourage in him, whatever may be our private thoughts! I think it is never well to compare child with child; it is, of course, constantly done in the nursery, but not wisely. It leads to more jealousy and quarrelling, I am inclined to think, than we sometimes imagine.

Fifthly, I would go in for a great deal of reading aloud. Discussions on characters in books can be extremely useful. I am old-fashioned enough to believe in Miss Yonge's books still. For girls, certainly. Boys may find her a 'bit thick!' But to bring children up to know and love the May family, and Guy Morville, is to bring them up amongst nice people, and that is always an education.

Books have a tremendous influence on character, and the
[p 615]
young mother who cannot make time for it with her children misses a great opportunity.

Sixthly, if I could begin again, I would find fault less—*much* less—and encourage more. For nearly every kind of temperament, if not for *quite* every kind, encouragement is good. Are we not all at our best with people who believe in us? Over and over again I have seen the almost magical effect on a child of a little encouragement.

Lastly, I would pray more for my children. Prayer, and love, and faith, and patience—with these I would surround my children, knowing that without them I can accomplish nothing; but that with them “all things are possible.”