

RESTORING THE MOTHER'S HABIT OF ATTENTION

Practical helps for the mother-teacher who wants to be all there

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“If mothers could learn to do for themselves what they do for their children when these are overdone, we should have happier households. Let the mother go out to play!”

— Charlotte Mason

First, the Right Diagnosis

Scattered attention is often a depletion problem before it is a discipline problem

Before we talk about restoring attention, we need to find out what is actually happening. Most of us, when we find ourselves distracted mid-lesson or unable to be fully present, reach immediately for a discipline solution. We tell ourselves to try harder, focus more, want it more.

But very often the more accurate diagnosis is depletion. The well is low. The supply lines are thin and you cannot restore something through willpower that has been depleted through neglect.

Two Questions to Consider:

What is draining my attention?

- Phone and notifications always nearby
- Too many open loops — tasks half-started, decisions deferred
- No margin between responsibilities
- Consuming without creating or resting
- Chronic low-grade mental overload
- Trying to give what has not been received

What fills my attention?

- Reading for your own delight, not for curriculum
- Unhurried time outdoors
- A practice that nourishes you
- Genuine rest
- Beauty engaged slowly
- Prayer with space for silence

Reflection: what is most draining my capacity for attention right now?



Daily Practices

Small, consistent habits that rebuild attention over time

1

The Morning Anchor

Before the school day begins, spend 10–15 minutes with something that asks to give your full attention. A passage of Scripture, a poem, a page of a book you are reading for yourself. No multitasking or having a phone nearby. This allows our brains to begin the day without fragmenting our attention.

What I will use for my morning anchor:

2

The Unhurried Walk

Whenever possible, practice the ritual daily walk without a phone, without a podcast, without earbuds. Pair this with your own personal nature study and focus on actually present rather than constantly anticipating what is next. Start with fifteen minutes a couple times a week.

3

The Commonplace Book

There are several notebooks that you may consider keeping that can help you cultivate the habit of attention. One promising notebook is the commonplace notebook. A commonplace book is a personal treasure trove of thoughts, quotes, and ideas that resonate with you. It's a space to capture the wisdom and inspiration you encounter in your daily life, whether from books, scripture, podcasts, or social media. By regularly recording these snippets, you not only enhance your attention but also create a rich resource to draw from in the future.

Engaging with your commonplace book can be a reflective practice, allowing you to revisit and deepen your understanding of the ideas that have touched you. Over time, it becomes a mosaic of your intellectual and emotional journey, providing a unique perspective on how your thoughts and values evolve. Consider setting aside a few minutes each day to jot down entries, and let this practice become a gentle ritual that nurtures your focus and enriches your inner life.

What notebooks would I like to be intentional about keeping? How can I plan time for this?

Before the Lesson

Environment and preparation practices that lower the cognitive load before you begin

4

The Threshold Ritual

Create a brief, consistent practice that marks the transition into teaching. A short prayer, a song or hymn, three slow breaths, a moment of stillness with your hands in your lap. Do this every single day, in the same way, until it becomes the signal your nervous system recognizes.

My threshold ritual will be:

5

The Pre-Lesson Download

Spend two minutes before your lesson block writing down everything that is competing for your attention: the email you need to send, the errand you cannot forget, the conversation you are still processing. Get it out of working memory and onto paper. Then close the notebook, you will have the opportunity to focus on these outside of school hours.

6

The Phone in Another Room

Not face-down on the table. Not on silent in your pocket. Another room. Research on the mere presence effect has found that a visible phone reduces cognitive capacity even when it is not being used, because part of the brain is always monitoring it. Remove the variable entirely. This is a design choice, not a willpower choice, and it costs you almost nothing except the low-grade anxiety of always being reachable.

Reflection: What are particular pain points that affect my habit of attention?



During the Lesson

In-the-moment practices for returning when you drift

7

The Note and Return

When your mind drifts, and it will drift, because that is what minds do, the practice is simply to notice it and return. No self-judgment or long internal debrief about how distracted you have been. Just: I was elsewhere, and now I am back. Every return strengthens the very habit you are trying to build.

8

The Parking Lot

Keep a small notepad within reach during lessons. When an intrusive thought arrives mid-lesson, like ‘I need to pick up this prescription’, write it down in two or three words and return to your child. This can help reduce the urgency of doing something right now and self interrupting.

9

Single-Tasking as a Practice

Within the lesson, give one thing your whole attention. If you’re homeschooling multiple children distractions are inevitable and will require management on your part. It is important to choose which distractions you opt into, keep your phone on silent, opt not to fill “spare time” with household tasks. Encourage your children to allow you to have uninterrupted time in various lessons with the understanding that they too will get the same respect.

Seasonal Restoration

Larger practices for when the depletion goes deeper than a daily habit can reach

Sometimes daily practices are not enough, because the depletion has gone deep. When you notice that your attention has been fractured for weeks, that you feel irritable and hollow and like you are performing your life rather than inhabiting it, daily habits are still necessary but something larger is also needed.

- **A reading season**

Choose one book (not a how-to, not a curriculum resource, not a parenting book) and read it slowly over several weeks for your own formation. A biography, a novel, a work of theology, a collection of essays. Let it be something that has nothing to do with homeschooling and allow yourself to be a student.

- **A half-day alone**

With some regularity, perhaps once a season, arrange a half-day where you are not needed by anyone. No errands, no productive agenda. Bring a book, a journal, or nothing. Go somewhere you find restorative that will nourish you like a hike or a museum.. Mason would call this going out to play, for mothers, this break isn't a luxury, it is a restorative practice.

- **A beauty practice**

Commit to regularly engaging with something beautiful and letting it take its time with you. A piece of music you listen to without doing anything else. A painting you sit with, a garden you tend, poetry read aloud. The attention that beauty asks of us is the same quality of attention we are trying to bring to our children.

- **A mother's education**

Consider investing in your own intellectual formation the same way you invest in your children's. A course, a reading group, a study of a subject you love. Mason believed that a mother's own education is inseparable from the quality of education she gives her children. This formation will help with your outflow that impacts your home atmosphere.

Reflection: what are areas that I need to nurture for my own formation?



My Personal Restoration Plan

Be specific. Not ‘I will try harder’ but a plan to live and attend fully

One thing I will do daily to replenish my attention:

One thing I will remove or reduce that is draining my attention:

My threshold ritual will be:

One seasonal practice I will protect this term:

I will know it is working when I notice:

“She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.”

— Proverbs 31:27