

"GRIT." [*Parents' Review*, March, 1891]

BY MRS. J. W.

ONE generation is apt to be contemptuous or intolerant of the educational theories of its predecessors; what was faulty in them is made off-hand accountable for all that is defective in the present result, while what was good has become such a matter-of-course as to be scarcely acknowledged. But while we all think that our parents and guardians made gross mistakes with us, and that our turning out so well is entirely due to our superior natural dispositions, we fancy that OUR CHILDREN AT LEAST will have no cause to complain of their training, and no pretext for making their forbears accountable for their failings and follies. Let us wait a bit, however, and we shall find the next generation taking its turn to pick holes. Probably they will find more fault than we did in like case; for children are now taken into confidence about themselves, and their own great importance is no longer scrupulously concealed from them. Only the other day I heard of some children of twelve or thirteen being present at a parents' meeting! The old-fashioned humble deference to the opinion of one's elders is not in this way generated, neither is it nowadays much approved. Many are of opinion that obedience should never be exacted from children without reasons given; and this doctrine carried to its logical conclusion would also constitute them judges of the sufficiency of the reasons, and of the reasons of the reasons! Children are learning very early to judge their parents both intellectually and morally, and to criticise their own training. Are we quite sure that our modern methods of education are going to stand this criticism?

The theory of education in vogue with the best parents and
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teachers is very plausible; it seems, whether consciously or not, to spring from Froebel's principle of securing to children the freest and most natural development possible, by surrounding them from the first with sympathy and kindly aid, and by warding off from them rude jars and contradictions until they have grown so into harmony with the world that these no longer exist. There is great attraction about such a scheme as this; it is idyllic; it charms like a dream of Paradise; while the old plan of repressing and thwarting the child, and forcing him into some sort of unwilling conformity to a stern environment, stands out in hideous contrast. Even the wise and gentle Locke, opposed as he was to much of the harsh and unsympathetic education of his day, says things which startle us. We come upon such statements as these: "Children should be used to submit their desires and go without their longings FROM THEIR VERY CRADLES." ... "Whatever they were importunate for they should be sure, for that very reason, to be denied. ... Children must leave it to the choice and ordering of their parents what they think properest for them, and how much; and must not be permitted to choose for themselves, and say, 'I would have wine, or white bread'; the very naming of it should make them lose it." Again he says, "Children love dominion; and this is the first original of most vicious habits." ... "They show their love of dominion in their desire to have things to be theirs. They would have propriety and possession, pleasing themselves with the power which that seems to give, and the right they thereby have to dispose of them as they please." This seems to us natural and harmless enough, but Locke continues: "He who thinks that these two roots of almost all the injustice and contention that so disturb human life are not early to be weeded out ... neglects the proper season to lay the foundations of a good and worthy man." In another connection he declares that "crying is a

fault that should not be tolerated in children" from whatever cause it proceeds. "For," he sagely remarks, "the many inconveniences this life is exposed to require we should not be too sensible of every little hurt." ... "That effeminacy [sic] of spirit, which is to be prevented or cured, nothing that I know so much increases in children as crying." He even goes so far when discussing courage and hardiness, as to advise that children should occasionally be put to some pain to accustom them to bear it; although he adds, "I am not so foolish to propose the Lacedæmonian discipline

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in our age and constitution." But "satisfy a child by a constant course of your care and kindness that you perfectly love him, and he may by degrees be accustomed to bear very painful and rough usage from you without flinching or complaining."

In all this there is a distinct educational drift to which there is little akin in modern theory, and perhaps still less in modern practice. A certain amount of hardness and sternness is inculcated as necessary to the production of energy, self-reliance, self-control, endurance, and dignity—of everything, in fact, that is commonly summed up under the phrase "strength of character," or in the Scotch term "grit." And however much we may disapprove old-fashioned methods of promoting strength of character, we must still allow that any education which neglects it fails. We shall need it as long as struggle is a condition of life, and moral and physical pain quite unavoidable. Time was when firmness and fortitude were regarded as the chief, and almost sole, ends of moral training; and we are rightly enough revolted at the petty tyranny to which children were consequently subjected, at the lack of sympathy with them, and meagre understanding of them, at the incessant contradiction and repression of them; and we see that the logical outcome of such treatment is a character hard, morose, constrained, and dull. In the vaunted reverence for, and submission to parents and teachers, we see either meanness of spirit or merely conventional behaviour, which breaks down when the time of independence comes and discovers no reality behind. And we find that the absence of pleasure and freedom, of kindness and tenderness, beget lifelessness and sourness of temper.

But the reaction against extremes of this kind may lead to opposite evils; and we not infrequently hear that children now tend to grow up nerveless and unenergetic and self-indulgent; that they face no difficulties, endure nothing quietly, exert no original force. They have no idea of "striving to attain," and become disgusted and miserable when the good things of life are not found all ready to their hand; they have no ideals or strong interests of any kind, and lack the power as well as the will to help themselves. While expecting to be provided with many means of happiness, they are unable to make good use of them, because they lack the energy and the eagerness which alone make continued enjoyment possible. The doctrine that lessons are to be made interesting, and that school-life should be other than "durance vile," is nowadays often construed to mean that a child

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is never to STRUGGLE with a difficult task, or to FORCE his attention: all the real work is to be done by the teacher, whose business it is to prepare the intellectual food in such a way as to be always tempting and easily swallowed. I know of more than one school in which the application of this theory has resulted in the general limpness of the pupils, the parents no doubt aiding and abetting. An intelligent lady who has had considerable experience of the matter writes that "parents nowadays seem to have an almost insane dread of their children having to endure anything approaching to hardship or even disagreeableness," and, as a consequence, whenever they come into competition with the sterner-nurtured children

of the artisan, they go to the wall." [sic] This weakness or effeminacy in home training is said to be especially observable in manufacturing towns, where many of the parents have risen by their own efforts from poverty to wealth: having known the bad side of hardship and struggle themselves, they seek to avoid them in any form for their children, and have no higher ideal for them than the preservation and increase of that physical well-being which has been their own goal in life. The difficulty of inciting children so brought up to any effort, or of creating in them any eagerness or enthusiasm, is enormous; their attention is mainly engrossed with their COMFORT, and to this they expect everything to be subordinated; there is room for no hero-worship, no devotion to a cause, in their stolid souls. But they often evince, however, an easy good-nature, a mild temper, and a certain sluggish affectionateness.

But supposing that we are agreed in disapproving of all this, how are we practically to oppose it, without sacrificing much in modern education that we rightly prize—a love and sympathy towards parents, brightness and naturalness, attachment to home life, ease of manner and confidence? If we had to choose between these and strength of character, we should be in a sad fix; but fortunately we need do nothing of the kind. Even as regards personal charm, which the easy-going indulgent treatment might be supposed specially to foster, is there anything more attractive than the dignity and peacefulness of a steady will and a mind at one with itself? It has often a classic beauty beside which the seductiveness of mere light-heartedness and easy good-nature look poor.

To secure the good and avoid the evil in this connection we must begin early—very early; and we must shun extremes, for
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there is nothing more fatal in education than to mount a hobby and ride it to death.

To make clear what is meant it will be worth while to instance a few practical applications. Let us start with a baby of a year old or under; it may learn something both of self-control and self-reliance by being allowed to do all that it can for itself, instead of having all its wishes anticipated and passively gratified. As it grunts and grows red in the face with its efforts to reach a distant object, to pick itself up when it has rolled over, to open a box or turn a handle, and in order to succeed checks instinctively little cries of impatience, it is laying the groundwork of energy and resolution. Over-careful and anxious mothers and nurses, in preventing a child from running the slightest risk or incurring the least hurt, prevent it also from acquiring any caution, patience, or endurance; and in the end the children so carefully guarded are often those who get the worst injuries; they cannot always be watched, and they have become helpless and heedless. Again, even a baby may be checked in excessive screaming for slight causes; and in the case of older children I agree with Locke in thinking that it is absolutely not to be tolerated; nothing in early life more evinces the lack, or prevents the acquirement, of self-control than this. And it is a matter of breeding as well as of morals. There is much less loud bawling to be heard among the children of cultivated parents than among those of the less educated, even apart, I believe, from special training; there is often an instinctive reserve and dignity in the one which is rare in the other. Later on, when a child has some command of language and can reason, there are a few necessary everyday disagreeables which he should be expected manfully to face, such as going to bed, or picking up toys, or taking a coldish bath. A little assistance or encouragement in doing such things might be given, but wheedling and cajoling should be avoided. I have seen people make a habit of chasing a child upstairs and frolicking with him every night, so that he was deluded as to the real end in view; and the consequence was

that when he reached the top and the chill reality burst suddenly upon him, he always howled fearfully.

As imagination strengthens and the future comes into play he should be taught to labour for ends more or less remote; to-day's effort should earn to-morrow's gratification, and whenever possible, he should be allowed to share in providing for his own needs and pleasures. Let him act as much as he can on his

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little stage of life, take a lively part in all that seriously goes on in it, instead of standing like a dummy and being handed about like a chattel. In this way his sympathy with grown-up people will develop; he will feel no great gulf between their world and his own, and he will have a delightful sense of useful activity. The toys children help to manufacture are twice as much valued by them, the games for which they must make some preparation twice as much appreciated. Vastly too much, even for enjoyment, is usually passively conferred upon them, and their lives are thus robbed of half their natural zest. Let a child earn a garden by thoroughly digging and weeding a plot, a pet by keeping it clean and well fed, a doll by sewing or washing its clothes, a tea-party by helping in the arrangements, a holiday by extra good work. In this way life will mean much more to him; he will have a sense of power and acquire self-respect.

As regards the mischief and damage which any lively child is sure to do, instead of entirely disregarding it, which would make him selfishly careless, or scolding and punishing, which would make him resentful—seeing that his offence was not intentional—the better plan would be to oblige him always to make what amends he can; let him fetch the cloth to wipe up the water he has spilled, and stop his play to assist in the mending of a broken toy. In little things and in great a child should always be expected to do his utmost to repair injuries done, either to grown people or to companions; this should be made a point of honour with him.

Another important matter is that children should be required to do what little they do, well, or at least as well as they CAN; they should not be commended for things which cost them no effort, and even in their play they should be expected to take pains. Do not praise a careless scribble or smudge of paint, or some senseless erection of blocks, whenever they are offered to your notice. The child will soon feel that your praise is of little value, that you give it because you take no interest in what he does and have no standard in regard to it. This will diminish his own interest and destroy his belief in himself much more than tardy recognition of merit would do.

When a lesson is given, or any task whatever set, complete attention should be insisted upon; no listlessness or trifling should be tolerated; but of course care must be taken that the strain does not last long, as children are neither physically nor mentally capable of prolonged concentration. The habit, however, of fixing

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the mind promptly and entirely upon one thing at a time outweighs almost all others in the worth of its moral and intellectual consequences. Weakness of character, vacillation, aimlessness, and inertness cannot go along with it.

The principle underlying these practical suggestions, which [sic] are, after all, but few and scattered, is plain and simple enough: it is this—that from the first a child's own efforts, physical, mental, and moral, should be as intimately as possible associated with all that he gains of good and avoids of evil; he is in all respects to be treated as an active, independent, and more or less rational agent, so that he may early learn to feel his own controlled will a

power in his small world.

But perhaps the most important condition of all success in this educational aim remains to be mentioned, and I have kept it purposely to the last. No endeavour to strengthen a child's will and to create self-reliance, energy, and endurance, will succeed if his life be dull and dreary, if half his time he is, what we elders call in our own case, "being bored." He must have things which it is worth his while to gain if he is to make struggles; he must have interests if he is to be eager; he must have plenty of scope for his faculties and activities if he is to exert them; and this scope should be always a little ahead of them. If one half of children's naughtiness and ill-temper comes of dulness, narrowness, and monotony, so does a great part of their weakness and stolidity. Having few things presented to them worth caring for or struggling for, they grow up apathetic and indolent.