

Bringing Children Up

I. A Method of Education

It is worthwhile to point out the differing characters of a system and a method, because parents let themselves be run away with often enough by some plausible 'system,' the object of which is to produce development in one direction—of the muscles, of the memory, of the reasoning faculty—were a complete all-round education. This easy satisfaction arises from the sluggishness of human nature, to which any definite scheme is more agreeable than the constant watchfulness, the unforeseen action, called for when the whole of a child's existence is to be used as the means of his education. But who is sufficient for an education so comprehensive, so incessant? A parent may be willing to undergo any definite labors for his child's sake; but to be always catering to his behoof, always contriving that circumstances shall play upon him for his good, is the part of a god and not of a man! A reasonable objection enough, if one looks upon education as an endless series of independent efforts, each to be thought out and acted out on the spur of the moment; but the fact is, that a few broad essential principles cover the whole field, and these once fully laid hold of, it is as easy and natural to act upon them as it is to act upon our knowledge of such facts as that fire burns and water flows. My endeavor in this and the following chapters will be to put these few fundamental principles before you in their practical bearing. Meantime, let us consider one or two preliminary questions.

II. The Child's Estate

The Child in the Midst.—And first, let us consider where and what the little being is who is entrusted to the care of human parents. A tablet to be written upon? A twig to be bent? Wax to be molded? Very likely; but he is much more—a being belonging to an altogether higher estate than ours; as it were, a prince committed to the fostering care of peasants.

III.—Offending the Children

Offences.—The first and second of the Divine edicts appear to include our sins of commission and of omission against the children: we offend them, when we do by them that which we ought not to have done; we despise them, when we leave undone those things which, for their sakes, we ought to have done. An offence, we know, is literally a stumbling-block, that which trips up the walker and causes him to fall.

Despise: to have a low opinion of, to undervalue"—thus the dictionary; and, as a matter of fact, however much we may delight in them, we grown-up people have far too low an opinion of children.

Hindering -The most fatal way of despising the child falls under the third educational law of the Gospels; it is to overlook and make light of his natural relationship with Almighty God. "

Children are born Law-abiding.— No less than this, that he is born a law abiding being, with a sense of *may*, and *must not*, of right and wrong. That is how children are sent into the world with the warning, "Take heed that ye offend not one of these little ones." And—this being so—who has not met big girls and boys, the children of right-minded parents, who yet do not know what *must* means, who are not moved by *ought*, whose hearts feel no stir at the solemn name of *Duty*, who know no higher rule of life than 'I want,' and 'I don't want,' 'I like,' and 'I don't like'? Heaven help parents and children when it has come to that!

They must perceive that their Governors are Law-compelled.—Where is the beginning of this tangle, spoiling the lives of parent and child alike? In this: that the mother began with no sufficient sense of duty; she thought herself free to allow and disallow, to say and unsay, at pleasure, as if the child were hers to do what she liked with. The child has never discovered a background of *must* behind his mother's decisions; he does not know that she *must not* let him break his sister's playthings, gorge himself with cake, spoil the pleasure of other people, because these things are not *right*. Let the child perceive that his parents are law-compelled as well as he, that they simply cannot allow him to do the things which have been forbidden, and he submits with the sweet meekness which belongs to his age.

IV.—Conditions of Healthy Brain-Activity

All Mind Labor means Wear of Brain.—And first of all, the more educable powers of the child—his intelligence, his will, his moral feelings—have their seat in his brain; that is to say, as the eye is the organ of sight, so is the brain, or some part of it, the organ of thought and will, of love and worship. Authorities differ as to how far it is possible to localize the functions of the brain; but this at least seems pretty clear—that none of the functions of mind are performed without real activity in the mass of grey and white nervous matter named 'the brain.' Now, this is not a matter for the physiologist alone, but for every mother and father of a family; because that wonderful brain, by means of which we do our thinking, if it is to act healthily and in harmony with the healthful action of the members, should act only under such conditions of exercise, rest, and nutrition as secure health in every other part of the body.

V—'The Reign of Law' in Education

Common Sense and Good Intentions.—Besides, though this physical culture of the brain may be only the groundwork of education, the method of it indicates what should be the method of all education; that is, orderly, regulated progress under the guidance of Law. The reason why education effects so much less than it should effect is just this—that in nine cases out of ten, sensible good parents trust too much to their common sense and their good intentions, forgetting that common sense must be at the pains to instruct itself in the nature of the case, and that well-intended efforts come to little if they are not carried on in obedience to divine laws, to be read in many cases, not in the Bible, but in the facts of life.

Law-abiding Lives often more blameless than Pious Lives.—It is a shame to believing people that many whose highest profession is that they do not know, and therefore do *not* believe, should produce more blameless lives, freer from flaws of temper, from the vice of selfishness, than do many sincerely religious people. It is a fact that will confront the children by-and-by, and one of which they require an explanation; and what is more, it is a fact that will have more weight, should it confront them in the person of a character which they cannot but esteem and love, than all the doctrinal teaching they have had in their lives. This appears to me the threatening danger to that confessed dependence upon and allegiance to Almighty God which we recognize as religion—not the wickedness, but the *goodness* of a school which refuses to admit any such dependence and allegiance.

The Child must not be left to his Human Nature.—This is precisely what half the parents in the world, and three-fourths of the teachers, are content to do; and what is the consequence? That the world is making advances, but the progress is, for the most part, amongst the few whose parents have taken their education seriously in hand; while the rest, who have been allowed to *stay where they were*, be no more, or no better than Nature made them, act as a heavy drag: for, indeed, the fact is, that they do not stay where they were; it is unchangeably true that the child who is not being constantly raised to a higher and a higher platform will sink to a lower and a lower. Wherefore, it is as much the parent's duty to educate his child into moral strength and purpose and intellectual activity as it is to feed him and clothe him; and that *in spite of his nature*, if it must be so. It is true that here and there circumstances step in and 'make a man' of the boy whose parents have failed to bring him under discipline; but this is a fortuitous aid which the educator is no way warranted to count upon.

I was beginning to see my way—not yet out of the psychological difficulty, which, so far as I was concerned, blocked the way to any real education; but now I could put my finger on the place, and that was something. Thus: -

The will of the child is pitifully feeble, weaker in the children of the weak, stronger in the children of the strong, but hardly ever to be counted upon as a *power* in education.

The nature of the child—his human nature—being the sum of what he is as a human being, and what he is in right of the stock he comes of, and what he is as the result of his own physical and mental constitution—this nature is incalculably strong.

Problem before the Educator.—The problem before the educator is to give the child control over his own nature, to enable him to hold himself in hand as much in regard to the traits we call good, as to those we call evil:—many a man makes shipwreck on the rock of what he grew up to think his characteristic virtue—his open-handedness, for instance.

Divine Grace works on the Lines of Human Effort.—In looking for a solution of this problem, I do not undervalue the Divine grace—far otherwise; but we do not always make enough of the fact that Divine grace is exerted on the lines of enlightened human effort; that the parent, for instance, who takes the trouble to understand what he is about in educating his child, deserves, and assuredly gets, support from above; and that Rebecca, let us say, had no right to bring up her son to be "thou worm, Jacob," in the trust that Divine grace would, speaking reverently, pull him through. Being a pious man, the son of pious parents, he was pulled through, but his days, he complains at the end, were "few and evil."

We Think, as we are accustomed to Think.— How does this bear on the practical work of bringing up children? In this way. We think, *as we are accustomed to think*; ideas come and go and carry on a ceaseless traffic in the rut—let us call it—you have made for them in the very nerve substance of the brain. You do not deliberately intend to think these thoughts; you may, indeed, object strongly to the line they are taking (two 'trains' of thought going on at one and the same time!), and objecting, you may be able to barricade the way, to put up 'No Road' in big letters, and to compel the busy populace of the brain-world to take another route. But who is able for these things? Not the child, immature of will, feeble in moral power, unused to the weapons of the spiritual warfare. He depends upon his parents; it rests with them to initiate the thoughts he shall think, the desires he shall cherish, the feelings he shall allow. Only to initiate; no more is permitted to them; but from this initiation will result the habits of thought and feeling which govern the man—his *character*, that is to say.