

## \* Special Papers. \*

### \* FORMATION OF GOOD HABITS.

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IN TWO PARTS.—I

Good habits in children, are, I think, like flowers. In some they are indigenous to the soil, requiring scarcely any care; in others, like exotics, requiring careful cultivation and encouragement; while in a third class the soil is so unfavorable that no amount of painstaking produces anything but unsatisfactory results. In the last, the perception of the fitness of things seems to be wholly wanting. Why it is so might be an interesting question to scientists.

The first essentials, then, to the cultivation of good habits are favorable conditions and surroundings; though sometimes, I admit, they are found under most adverse circumstances. From this point of view arises the question: Is the parent or the teacher the real gardener? Undoubtedly the first claims the higher authority, but where the first fails, either through incapacity or want of moral principle, then it becomes the teacher's duty, as far as in him lies, to supply the lack, and prevent the weeds from choking either the sickly or the healthy plant.

Foremost of these essentials to the formation or cultivation of good habits is a comfortable school-room, well lighted, with closely fitting sashes that will not stun the ears on every windy day with their ceaseless rattling. The room should be heated with hot air or steam, if possible, for children cannot remain at rest, much less study, while being slowly roasted alongside a huge box stove placed in the middle of the room, any more than can their companions, who, in other parts of the room, are suffering with their feet at freezing point, the teacher being meanwhile distracted with "Please I'm too hot," from one quarter, while from another comes the request, "Please may I go to the stove," to say nothing of the incessant worry caused by the conflict between his love of order and discipline, and his feelings of compassion for the pupils, who in many cases, among the poorer classes, are neither comfortably clothed nor shod. It is indeed no unusual thing for some poor shivering little mortal, who has walked perhaps a mile to school on a keen frosty morning, to enter the school-room crying from the pain of tingling hands and feet, an event which is sure to bring the whole work of the school to a stand, while the teacher chafes the little sufferer's hands till the circulation is restored, and one or two willing workers among the larger pupils remove the boots, *often water-soaked*, from the half frozen feet. This case is by no means imaginary.

Next to a comfortable room, a comfortable desk, with slightly sloping back and of a proper height for the occupant, is indispensable if a child is to maintain a proper position without growing stooped or round shouldered while at work.

With all his physical wants attended to, the child is now in a position for work.

I may remark here that it is not by repressing all that is natural in a child but by guiding it into safe channels that we form the basis of its character and fit it for all the conditions of life as well as for its final destiny. Goldwin Smith, who is no mean authority on such matters, in a lecture delivered in one of the High Schools in this county many years ago, highly commended the advantage of having a *long youth* as school children before being thrust into the cares of life.

As my subject deals principally with the culture of good habits in the school-room and the best means of promoting them, I may combine some of those habits that appear to me to be naturally connected.

1st. Punctuality and order.

2nd. Industry and perseverance.

3rd. Obedience and cleanliness.

We are told that order is Heaven's first law; but I have placed punctuality first, as without it there can be no order in a school-room. As a stream cannot be pure unless the fountain itself be pure, so to ensure good habits in the children, we must begin with the teacher, who is, or ought to be, the visible and practical exponent of all the good qualities we expect the pupils to acquire. And let no one imagine that his duties to his pupils cease when the four o'clock bell rings, that the rough, noisy, coarse and even profane talk frequently indulged in by boys on their way from school should pass unnoticed, or that the equally coarse, unrefined slang and loud laughter by which some girls (few in number it is to be hoped), attract attention on the streets, is something with which a teacher has nothing to do, even though he may have been a listener to it all, for he may rest assured that his pupil's manners will be *justly or unjustly* considered a reflex of his own.

Children are by no means unfledged angels, as most of us, no doubt, have discovered long ago, and are largely, as we have been often told, "creatures of imitation," who very early learn to discriminate between precept and practice. Therefore if we expect them to imitate and profit by the example set them it will be by taking care that the example is all it ought to be, *and by ceaseless supervision*. To be successful, I think it is indispensable that a teacher should be a lover of children to a greater or lesser extent, one who is able to read their dispositions, feel for their difficulties and put himself in their place by sympathizing with their childish griefs and troubles, which are sometimes as overwhelming to the little ones as our greater trials are to us, and who is to them the embodiment of all knowledge (though I protest against the teacher who never admits that he makes a mistake), and who will not think his time wasted if he can but remove a stumbling block from the path of the dullest intellect under his care.

Many a teacher has lost all his labor and felt that all his efforts were wasted through having failed to realize that though a problem or theorem was very simple to him, it was *anything* but simple to the pupil.

I would pause here to pay a passing tribute of respect to the genius and merit of one of the noblest teachers that ever stood in a school-room. I refer to the late Mr.

McNevin, formerly Mathematical master in the Caledonia High School, the true friend of the painstaking student, who has often spent his much needed recess in explaining again and again a difficult problem to a dull pupil, and whom I have seen applaud with kind words and sparkling eyes the boy or girl who had detected some trivial error in a problem which he had himself placed on the board for them, regarding it as a proof that they had carefully gone over it, and had at heart tried to understand it.

With regard to Punctuality, I think the children are rarely so much to blame for the want of it as their parents. Where the child has loitered, his manner on entering the school-room usually declares the fact. Conscience which "doth make cowards of us all" generally sends the delinquent in with downcast head, hesitating step, and stealthy movement, as if anxious to evade notice; but if detained legally the offender generally assumes a confident air such as seems rather to court an enquiry, which, when made, is commonly met with the reply, "Please, mamma sent me to the store," or "Pa sent me after the cow," these errands being in the minds of the children perfectly satisfactory excuses, although they might just as well have been performed earlier or deferred till later in the day. But any discussion on the point only gives the child the impression that there is some indefinable feeling of antagonism between parent and teacher, in which, naturally, the parent has the first right to the child's attention and obedience.

Where the fault is the parents', I simply require a note to that effect. Where they cannot write, then a message sent by some older brother or sister, for unfortunately children will sometimes deviate from the truth. If the fault is that of the child, the offence will not be repeated more than once or twice if it be well understood that the offender invariably forfeits *just as many minutes* at the next recess, as nothing produces such serious thoughts as the deprivation of the usual play hour. The same treatment will always procure a prompt response to the bell, made still more effective by the dread of losing his place in his class.

I imagine that in graded schools, the maintenance of order is a much easier matter than in those that are not graded. In the first, the whole division is engaged on the same subject at the same time, and the teacher's eye is at once attracted by any disorder however slight. It is very different when there are four and even five classes in the same room, no two of which are employed in precisely the same work at the same time, and where the teacher's attention is necessarily claimed by the class reciting. The most annoying habit a teacher has to contend with, and the most difficult to prevent, is the habit of talking or whispering. Quietness is not the normal condition of a healthy child, especially between the ages of five and eight. Yet if it is to acquire knowledge, a certain amount of repression is a positive necessity. Where absolute stillness is enforced on children of the ages I have mentioned, I think *fear* must be the active agent in procuring it. If there is any other