

Chapter Seven: Cultivating Tastes

In prior times children grew up with a mind to work – it was breathed in by the atmosphere of the home. Many children and many duties required many hands. As society has progressed much of the work is accomplished outside of the household and parents labor in work places unseen by their children. With this in mind it is important to train a child in a view towards work. Charlotte Mason gives us several principles in training children to work well.

- **Time-table; Definite Work in a Given Time**¹ — In the first place, there is a time-table, written out fairly, so that the child knows what he has to do and how long each lesson is to last. This idea of definite work to be finished in a given time is valuable to the child, not only as training him in habits of order, but in diligence; he learns that one time is *not* 'as good as another'; that there is no right time left for what is not done in its own time; and this knowledge alone does a great deal to secure the child's *attention* to his work.... The sense that there is not much time for his sums or his reading, keeps the child's wits on the alert and helps to fix his attention; he has time to learn just so much of any one subject as it is good for him to take in at once: and if the lessons be judiciously alternated—sums first, say, while the brain is quite fresh; then writing, or reading—some more or less mechanical exercise, by way of a rest; and so on, the program varying a little from day to day, but the same principle throughout—a 'thinking' lesson first, and a 'painstaking' lesson to follow,—the child gets through his morning lessons without any sign of weariness.
- **Training in Attention**—It is evident that *attention* is no 'faculty' of the mind; indeed, it is *very* doubtful how far the various operations of the mind should

¹ Charlotte Mason, *Home Education* 8-9

be described as 'faculties' at all. *Attention* is hardly even an operation of the mind, but is simply the act by which the whole mental force is applied to the subject in hand. This act, of bringing the whole mind to bear, may be trained into a *habit* at the will of the parent or teacher, who attracts and holds the child's attention by means of a sufficient motive.

- **Attractiveness of Knowledge.** —Of course, the most obvious means of quickening and holding the attention of children lies in the attractiveness of knowledge itself, and in the real appetite for knowledge with which they are endowed. But how successful faulty teachers are in curing children of any desire to know, is to be seen in many a school room.
- **Training in the Will – Being Self-Compelled²**—As the child gets older, he is taught to bring *his own will* to bear; *to make himself* attend in spite of the most inviting suggestions from without. He should be taught to feel a certain triumph in compelling himself to fix his thoughts. Let him know what the real difficulty is, how it is the nature of his mind to be incessantly thinking, but how the thoughts, if left to themselves, will always run off from one thing to another, and that the struggle and the victory required of him is to fix his thoughts upon the task in hand. 'You have done your *duty*,' with a look of sympathy from his mother, is a reward for the child who has made this effort in the strength of his growing will. But it cannot be too much borne in mind that attention is, to a great extent, the product of the educated mind; that is, one can only attend in proportion as one has the intellectual power of developing the topic. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this habit of attention. It is, to quote words of weight, "within the reach of everyone, and should be made the primary object of all mental discipline"; for

² Charlotte Mason, *Home Education* 145 -147

whatever the natural gifts of the child, it is only so far as the habit of attention is cultivated in him that he is able to make use of them.

- **A Reason for Weariness**—If it were only as it saves wear and tear, a perpetual tussle between duty and inclination, it is worthwhile for the mother to lay herself out to secure that her child never does a lesson into which he does not put his heart. And that is no difficult undertaking; the thing is, to be on the watch from the beginning against the formation of the contrary habit of *inattention*. A great deal has been said lately about overpressure, and we have glanced at one or two of the causes whose effects go by this name. But truly, one of the most fertile causes of an overdone brain is a failure in the habit of attention. I suppose we are all ready to admit that it is not the things we *do*, but the things we *fail to do*, which fatigue us, with the sense of omission, with the worry of hurry in overtaking our tasks. And this is almost the only cause of failure in the work in the case of the healthy schoolboy or schoolgirl: wandering wits hinder a lesson from being fully taken in at the right moment; that lesson becomes a bugbear, continually wanted henceforth and never there; and the sense of loss tries the young scholar more than would the attentive reception of a dozen such lessons.
- **A Child should Execute Perfectly.** No work should be given to a child that he cannot execute *perfectly*, and then perfection should be required from him as a matter of course. For instance, he is set to do a copy of strokes, and is allowed to show a slateful at all sorts of slopes and all sorts of intervals; his moral sense is vitiated, his *eye* is injured. Set him six strokes to copy; let him, not bring a slateful, but six perfect strokes, at regular distances and at regular slopes. If he produces a faulty pair, get him to point out the fault, and persevere until he has produced his task; if he does not do it to-day, let him go on to-morrow and the next day, and when the six perfect strokes appear, let it be an occasion of triumph. So with the little tasks of painting, drawing,

or construction he sets himself—let everything he does *be well done*. An unsteady house of cards is a thing to be ashamed of. Closely connected with this habit of 'perfect work' is that of finishing whatever is taken in hand. The child should rarely be allowed to set his hand to a new undertaking until the last is finished. The Habit of turning out Imperfect Work. —'Throw perfection into all you do' is a counsel upon which a family may be brought up with great advantage. We English, as a nation, think too much of persons, and too little of *things, work, execution*. Our children are allowed to make their figures or their letters, their stitches, their dolls' clothes, their small carpentry, anyhow, with the notion that they will do better by-and-by. Other nations—the Germans and the French, for instance—look at the question philosophically, and know that if children get the *habit* of turning out imperfect work, the men and women will undoubtedly keep that habit up. I remember being delighted with the work of a class of about forty children, of six and seven, in an elementary school at Heidelberg. They were doing a writing lesson, accompanied by a good deal of oral teaching from a master, who wrote each word on the blackboard. By-and-by the slates were shown, and I did not observe *one faulty or irregular letter* on the whole forty slates. The same principle of 'perfection' was to be discerned in a recent exhibition of schoolwork (held throughout France. No faulty work was shown, to be excused on the plea that it was the work of children.

- **Ye Are not Your Own³**—But if children are brought up from the first with this magnet—'Ye are not your own'; the divine Author of your being has given you life, and a body finely adapted for His service; He gives you the work of preserving this body in health, nourishing it in strength, and training it in fitness for whatever special work He may give you to do in His world,—why,

³ Charlotte Mason, *School Education* 103-104

young people themselves would readily embrace a more Spartan regimen; they would desire to be available, and physical transgressions and excesses, however innocent they seem, would be self-condemned by the person who felt that he was trifling with a trust. It would be good work to keep to the front this idea of living under authority, training under authority, serving under authority, a discipline of life readily self-embraced by children, in whom the heroic impulse is always strong. We would not reduce the pleasures of childhood and youth by an iota; rather we would increase them, for the disciplined life has more power of fresh enjoyment than is given to the unrestrained. Neither is it lawful for parents to impose any unnecessary rigors upon their children; this was the error of the eighteenth century and of the early decades of our own age, when hunger, cold, and denial, which was by no means self-denial, were supposed wholesome for children. All we claim is that every young person shall be brought up under the sense of *authority* in the government, management, and training of his body. The sense that health is a duty, and that any trifling with health, whether vicious or careless, is really of the nature of suicide, springs from this view—that life is held in trust from a supreme Authority.

Question and Thoughts to Consider

1. Why is a set work for a set time an important principle to consider? What would have to change for you and your child to institute this principle in the home?
2. Think for a moment of a time that you gave focused attention, what characterized this time?
3. What does Mason say about attention which is contrary to modern thought on attention?

4. Charlotte Mason instructs parents and teachers to teach children what is natural to human beings. With regards to self compelling power, what is natural to human persons? How might we instruct children to have this power in their own lives?
5. What is the habit of perfect work? If perfect work is the mean, what are the excessive and deficient areas that parents/teachers need to be aware of in this instruction?
6. How does Mason show potential and capacity of persons through this habit of perfect work?
7. Talk about authority and duty and how this principle relates with work.