PLENARY SESSION GUIDE
Volume 1 of Charlotte Mason’s Home Education Series
Welcome to The Plenary!

Ruk Martin  Plenary  Rachel Lebowitz
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INTRODUCTION

Some Preliminary Considerations

Not the least sign of the higher status they have gained, is the growing desire for work that obtains amongst educated women. The world wants the work of such women; and presently, as education becomes more general, we shall see all women with the capacity to work falling into the ranks of working women, with definite tasks, fixed hours, and for wages, the pleasure and honor of doing useful work if they are under no necessity to earn money.

Children Are a Public Trust

Now, that work which is of most importance to society is the bringing-up and instruction of the children in the school, certainly, but far more in the home, because it is more than anything else the home influences brought to bear upon the child that determine the character and career of the future man or woman. It is a great thing to be a parent: there is no promotion, no dignity, to compare with it. The parents of but one child may be cherishing what shall prove a blessing to the world. But then, entrusted with such a charge, they are not free to say, "I may do as I will with mine own." The children are, in truth, to be regarded less as personal property than as public trusts, put into the hands of parents that they may make the very most of them for the good of society. And this responsibility is not equally divided between the parents: it is upon the mothers of the present that the future of the world depends, in even a greater degree than upon the fathers, because it is the mothers who have the sole direction of the children's early, most impressionable years. This is why we hear so frequently of great men who have had good mothers that is, mothers who brought up their children themselves, and did not make over their gravest duty to indifferent persons.

Mothers Owe 'A Thinking Love' to Their Children

"The mother is qualified," says Pestalozzi, "and qualified by the Creator Himself, to become the principal agent in the development of her child; . . . and what is demanded of her is a thinking love. . . . God has given to thy child all the faculties of our nature, but the grand point remains undecided how shall this heart, this head, these hands, be employed? to whose service shall they be dedicated? A question the answer to which involves a futurity of happiness or misery to a life so

Some Preliminary Considerations is the introduction to Part 1 of Volume 1.

Fun Fact: Did you know that Charlotte Mason started her career in education by offering a series of lectures to mothers in 1885. Those lectures were called Home Education: A Course of Lectures to Ladies for the Education of Girls at Home by Charlotte Mason. Those series of lectures were eventually bound together in a book. That book is known to us today as Volume 1 of Home Education.
Volume 1 Text - Part 1

dear to thee. Maternal love is the first agent in education.”

We are waking up to our duties, and in proportion as mothers become more highly educated and efficient, they will doubtless feel the more strongly that the education of their children during the first six years of life is an undertaking hardly to be entrusted to any hands but their own. And they will take it up as their profession that is, with the diligence, regularity, and punctuality which men bestow on their professional labors.

That the mother may know what she is about, may come thoroughly furnished to her work, she should have something more than a hearsay acquaintance with the theory of education, and with those conditions of the child’s nature upon which such theory rests.

**THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN ‘DREADFULLY DEFECTIVE’**

“The training of children,” says Mr. Herbert Spencer “—physical, moral, and intellectual—is dreadfully defective. And in great measure it is so, because parents are devoid of that knowledge by which this training can alone be rightly guided. What is to be expected when one of the most intricate of problems is undertaken by those who have given scarcely a thought to the principle on which its solution depends? For shoemaking or housebuilding, for the management of a ship or of a locomotive engine, a long apprenticeship is needful. Is it, then, that the unfolding of a human being in body and mind is so comparatively simple a process that any one may superintend and regulate it with no preparation whatever? If not if the process is, with one exception, more complex than any in Nature, and the task of ministering to it one of surpassing difficulty is it not madness to make no provision for such a task? Better sacrifice accomplishments than omit this all-essential instruction. . . Some acquaintance with the first principles of physiology and the elementary truths of psychology is indispensable for the right bringing-up of children. . . Here are the indisputable facts: that the development of children in mind and body follows certain laws; that unless these laws are in some degree conformed to by parents, death is inevitable; that unless they are in a great degree conformed to, there must result serious physical and mental defects; and that only when they are completely conformed to, can a perfect maturity be reached. Judge, then, whether all who may one day be parents should not strive with some anxiety to learn what these laws are.”

Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) was a popular British philosopher, sociologist, and biologist of the Victorian Era. When someone uses the term “survival of the fittest,” they are quoting Spencer. He first used the phrase in his book *Principles of Biology* in 1864 after reading Charles Darwin’s book, *On the Origin of Species*. Here, Charlotte is quoting from Spencer’s book *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects*. Spencer also quotes Pestalozzi in his book. This entire paragraph is a quote from Spencer.
HOW PARENTS USUALLY PROCEED The parent begins instinctively by regarding his child as an unwritten tablet, and is filled with great resolves as to what he shall write thereon. By-and-by, traits of disposition appear, the child has little ways of his own; and, at first, every new display of personality is a delightful surprise. That the infant should show pleasure at the sight of his father, that his face should cloud in sympathy with his mother, must always be wonderful to us. But the wonder stales; his parents are used to the fact by the time the child shows himself a complete human being like themselves, with affections, desires, powers; taking to his book, perhaps, as a duck to the water; or to the games which shall make a man of him. The notion of doing all for the child with which the parents began gradually recedes. So soon as he shows that he has a way of his own he is encouraged to take it. Father and mother have no greater delight than to watch the individuality of their child unfold as a flower unfolds. But Othello loses his occupation. The more the child shapes his own course, the less do the parents find to do, beyond feeding him with food convenient, whether of love, or thought, or of bodily meat and drink. And here, we may notice, the parents need only supply; the child knows well enough how to appropriate. The parents' chief care is, that that which they supply shall be wholesome and nourishing, whether in the way of picture-books, lessons, playmates, bread and milk, or mother's love. This is education as most parents understand it, with more of meat, more of love, more of culture, according to their kind and degree. They let their children alone, allowing human nature to develop on its own lines, modified by facts of environment and descent.

Nothing could be better for the child than this 'masterly inactivity,' so far as it goes. It is well he should be let grow and helped to grow according to his nature; and so long as the parents do not step in to spoil him, much good and no very evident harm comes of letting him alone. But this philosophy of let him be/ while it covers a part, does not cover the serious part of the parents' calling; does not touch the strenuous incessant efforts upon lines of law which go to the producing of a human being at his best.

Nothing is trivial that concerns a child; his foolish- seeming words and ways are pregnant with meaning for the wise. It is in the infinitely little we must study the infinitely great; and the vast possibilities, and the right direction of education, are indicated in the open book of the little child's thoughts.

Othello is a play by Shakespeare. Charlotte is quoting a line in Act 3, Scene 3: “Farewell! Othello’s occupation’s gone.”
Volume 1 Text - Part 1

A generation ago, a great teacher amongst us never wearied of reiterating that in the Divine plan “the family is the unit of the nation”: not the individual, but the family. There is a great deal of teaching in the phrase, but this lies on the surface; the whole is greater than the part, the whole contains the part, owns the part, orders the part; and this being so, the children are the property of the nation, to be brought up for the nation as is best for the nation, and not according to the whim of individual parents. The law is for the punishment of evil-doers, for the praise of them that do well; so, Practically, parents have very free play; but it is as well we should remember that the children are a national trust whose bringing- up is the concern of all even of those unmarried and childless persons whose part in the game is the rather dreary one of ‘looking on.’

Questions for the Use of Students

Introduction - Some Preliminary Considerations
1. Show that children are a public trust. What follows?
2. What questions does Pestalozzi put to mothers?
3. What is Mr. Herbert Spencer’s argument for the study of education?
4. How do parents usually proceed?
5. What is the strenuous part of a parent's work?

Plenary Notes

The ‘great teacher’ referred to here is Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872). He was an English theologian whose books included The Kingdom of Christ (1838) and Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy (1872). Charlotte quotes him again in the first chapter of Volume 2: Parents and Children.

Questions for the Use of Students is found in Appendix B of Volume 1. We have moved them to the end of each chapter rather than leaving them in the Appendix.

The students in question were persons preparing to become Qualified Members of the Parents’ National Educational Union (PNEU), or CM teachers, just like you!
CHAPTER 6
CONDITIONS OF HEALTHY BRAIN ACTIVITY

Having just glanced at the wide region of forbidden ground, we are prepared to consider what it is, definitely and positively, that the mother owes to her child under the name of Education.

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 the 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.

EXERCISE Most of us have met with a few eccentric and a good many silly persons, concerning whom the question forces itself: Were these people born with less brain power than others? Probably not; but if they were allowed to grow up without the daily habit of appropriate moral and mental work, if they were allowed to dawdle through youth without regular and sustained efforts of thought or will, the result would be the same, and the brain which should have been invigorated by daily exercise has become flabby and feeble as a healthy arm would be after being carried for years in a sling. The large active brain is not content with entire idleness; it strikes out lines for itself and works fitfully, and the man or woman becomes eccentric, because wholesome mental effort, like moral, must be carried on under the discipline of rules. A shrewd writer suggests that mental indolence may have been in some measure the cause of those pitiable attacks of derangement and depression from which poor Cowper suffered; the making of graceful verses when the ‘maggot bit’ did not afford him the amount of mental labor necessary for his well-being.

Indolence (noun) - avoidance of activity or exertion; laziness

FUN FACT: Poor Cowper was actually William Cowper, an English poet and writer who lived from 1731-1800 and who wrote many verses and lines about maggots. He was also institutionalized for insanity. We are not sure if the two are related! But Charlotte was so well read that she knew of Cowper and used him as an example in this chapter. Charlotte seems to suggest that Cowper was prone to frequent bouts of indolence. By the way, Cowper is best known for a line he wrote in a poem titled “Light Shining Out of Darkness.” I’m sure you’ve heard it before: God moves in mysterious ways.
The outcome of which is: Do not let the children pass a day without distinct efforts, intellectual, moral, volitional; let them brace themselves to understand; let them compel themselves to do and to bear; and let them do right at the sacrifice of ease and pleasure: and this for many higher reasons, but, in the first and lowest place, that the mere physical organ of mind and will may grow vigorous with work.

REST Just as important is it that the brain should have due rest; that is, should rest and work alternately. And here two considerations come into play. In the first place, when the brain is actively at work it is treated as is every other organ of the body in the same circumstances; that is to say, a large additional supply of blood is attracted to the head for the nourishment of the organ which is spending its substance in hard work. Now, there is not an indefinite quantity of what we will for the moment call surplus blood in the vessels. The supply is regulated on the principle that only one set of organs shall be excessively active at one time now the limbs, now the digestive organs, now the brain; and all the blood in the body that can be spared goes to the support of those organs which, for the time being, are in a state of labor.

REST AFTER MEALS The child has just had his dinner, the meal of the day which most severely taxes his digestive organs; for as much as two or three hours after, much labor is going on in these organs, and the blood that can be spared from elsewhere is present to assist. Now, send the child out for a long walk immediately after dinner - the blood goes to the laboring extremities, and the food is left half digested; give the child a regular course of such dinners and walks, and he will grow up a dyspeptic. Set him to his books after a heavy meal, and the case is as bad; the blood which should have been assisting in the digestion of the meal goes to the laboring brain.

It follows that the hours for lessons should be carefully chosen, after periods of mental rest sleep or play, for instance - and when there is no excessive activity in any other part of the system. Thus, the morning, after breakfast (the digestion of which lighter meal is not a severe tax), is much the best time for lessons and every sort of mental work; if the whole afternoon cannot be spared for out-of-door recreation, that is the time for mechanical tasks such as needle-work, drawing, practicing; the children's wits are bright enough in the evening, but the drawback to evening work is, that the brain, once excited, is inclined to carry on its labors beyond bedtime, and dreams, wakeful-

In Victorian England, dinner was eaten at noon and was the heaviest meal of the day, while luncheon was a more formal noon meal. Afternoon Tea consisted of a light snack typically eaten between 3:30-5:00 p.m. The custom of Afternoon Tea originated among the British upper class. Evening Tea, or High Tea, was served between 5:00-7:00 p.m. and was associated more with the working class. Supper was a later evening meal.

Dyspeptic (noun) - a person who suffers from indigestion or irritability; (adj.) - of or having indigestion or constant irritability; grouchy, disagreeable
son why of only two or three practical rules of health is made so plain that they cannot be evaded without a sense of law-breaking.

I fear the reader may be inclined to think that I am inviting his attention for the most part to a few physiological matters - the lowest round of the educational ladder. The lowest round it may be, but yet it is the lowest round, the necessary step to all the rest. For it is not too much to say that, in our present state of being, intellectual, moral, even spiritual life and progress depend greatly upon physical conditions. That is to say, not that he who has a fine physique is necessarily a good and clever man; but that the good and clever man requires much animal substance to make up for the expenditure of tissue brought about in the exercise of his virtue and his intellect. For example, is it easier to be amiable, kindly, candid, with or without a headache or an attack of neuralgia?

QUESTIONS FOR THE USE OF STUDENTS
CHAPTER 6 - CONDITIONS OF HEALTHY BRAIN ACTIVITY
1. What is the first condition of successful education?
2. Show that daily efforts, intellectual, moral, and physical, are necessary for children.
3. On what principle is the blood-supply regulated?
4. Show the importance of rest after meals.
5. What is the best time for lessons? Why?
6. On what principle should a time-table be arranged?
7. Show that brain activity is affected by nourishment.
8. Under what conditions does food increase the vital quality of the blood?
9. Why must food be varied?
10. Show that children are spendthrifts of vitality.
11. Give a few useful hints concerning meals.
12. Why should there be talk at meals?
13. Give some rules to secure variety.
14. Show fully that air is as important as food.
15. What have you to say of the children's daily walk?
16. What is meant by the oxygenation of the blood?
17. Show that oxygen has its limitations.
18. What are the dangers of unchanged air in spacious rooms?
19. 'I feed Alice on beef-tea.' Why?
20. What of Alice's mind?
21. What are the joys of Wordsworth's 'Lucy'?
22. Show the danger of stuffy rooms.