Principle #7

EDUCATION IS A DISCIPLINE

FINDING your way with Charlotte Mason's 20 Principles

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PRINCIPLE #7

PART 2: EDUCATION IS A DISCIPLINE

By this formula we mean the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully whether habits of mind or of body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structure to habitual lines of thought, i.e., to our habits.

Education is not after all to either teacher or child the fine careless rapture we appear to have figured it. We who teach and they who learn are alike constrained; there is always effort to be made in certain directions; yet we face our tasks from a new point of view. We need not labor to get children to learn their lessons; that, if we would believe it, is a matter which nature takes care of. Let the lessons be of the right sort and children will learn them with delight. The call for strenuousness comes with the necessity of forming habits; but here again we are relieved. The intellectual habits of the good life form themselves in the following out of the due curriculum in the right way. As we have already urged, there is but one right way, that is, children must do the work for themselves. They must read the given pages and tell what they have read, they must perform, that is, what we may call the act of knowing. We are all aware, alas, what a monstrous quantity of printed matter has gone into the dustbin of our memories, because we have failed to perform that quite natural and spontaneous ‘act of knowing,’ as easy to a child as breathing and, if we would believe it, comparatively easy to ourselves. The reward is two-fold: no intellectual habit is so valuable as that of attention; it is a mere habit but it is also the hallmark of an educated person. Use is second nature, we are told; it is not too much to say that [100] ‘habit is ten natures,’ and we can all imagine how our work would be eased if our subordinates listened to instructions with the full attention which implies recollection. Attention is not the only habit that follows due self-education. The habits of fitting and ready expression, of obedience, of good-will, and of an impersonal outlook are spontaneous byproducts of education in this sort. So, too, are the habits of right thinking and right judging; while physical habits of neatness and order attend upon the self-respect which follows an education which respects the personality of children.

Physiologists tell us that thoughts which have become habitual make somehow a mark upon the brain substance, but we are bold in calling it a mark for there is no discernible effect to be quoted. Whether or no the mind be served by the brain in this matter, we are empirically certain that a chief function of education is the establishment of such ways of thinking in children as shall issue in good and useful living, clear thinking, aesthetic enjoyment, and, above all, in the religious life. How it is possible that spirit should act upon matter is a mystery to us, but that such act takes place we perceive every time we note a scowling brow, or, on the other hand –

A sweet attractive kind of grace,
A full assurance given by looks;
Continual comfort in a face.
The lineaments of gospel books.”

We all know how the physical effort of smiling affects ourselves in our sour moods –

“Nor soul helps flesh more now, than flesh helps soul.”

Both are at our service in laying down the rails, so to speak, upon which the good life must needs run. In the past we have, no doubt, gone through an age of infant slavery, an age of good habits enforced by
vigorously penalties, conscientiously by the over scrupulous eighteenth century parent, and infamously by the school-masters, the ‘Creakles’ and the ‘Squeers’ who labored only for their own ease and profit. Now, the pendulum swings the other way. We have lost sight of the fact that habit is to life what rails are to transport cars. It follows that lines of habit must be laid down towards given ends and after careful survey, or the joltings and delays of life become insupportable. More, habit is inevitable. If we fail to ease life by laying down habits of right thinking and right acting, habits of wrong thinking and wrong acting fix themselves of their own accord. We avoid decision and indecision brings its own delays, “and days are lost lamenting o’er lost days.” Almost every child is brought up by his parents in certain habits of decency and order without which he would be a social outcast. Think from another point of view how the labor of life would be increased if every act of the bath, toilet, table, every lifting of the fork and use of spoon were a matter of consideration and required an effort of decision! No; habit is like fire, a bad master but an indispensable servant; and probably one reason for the nervous scrupulosity, hesitation, indecision of our day, is that life was not duly eased for us in the first place by those whose business it was to lay down lines of habit upon which our behavior might run easily.

It is unnecessary to enumerate those habits which we should aim at forming, for everyone knows more about these than anyone practices. We admire the easy carriage of the soldier but shrink from the discipline which is able to produce it. We admire the lady who can sit upright through a long dinner, who in her old age prefers a straight chair because she has arrived at due muscular balance and has done so by a course of discipline. There is no other way of forming any good habit, though the discipline is usually that of the internal government which the person exercises upon himself; but a certain strenuousness in the formation of good habits is necessary because every such habit is the result of conflict. The bad habit of the easy life is always pleasant and persuasive and to be resisted with pain and effort, but with hope and certainty of success, because in our very structure is the preparation for forming such habits of muscle and mind as we deliberately propose to ourselves. We entertain the idea which gives birth to the act and the act repeated again and again becomes the habit; ‘Sow an act,’ we are told, ‘reap a habit.’ ‘Sow a habit, reap a character.’ But we must go a step further back, we must sow the idea or notion which makes the act worthwhile. The lazy boy who hears of the Great Duke’s narrow camp bed, preferred by him because when he wanted to turn over it was time to get up, receives the idea of prompt rising. But his nurse or his mother knows how often and how ingeniously the tale must be brought to his mind before the habit of prompt rising is formed; she knows too how the idea of self-conquest must be made at home in the boy’s mind until it become a chivalric impulse which he cannot resist. It is possible to sow a great idea lightly and casually and perhaps this sort of sowing should be rare and casual because if a child detect a definite purpose in his mentor he is apt to stiffen himself against it. When parent or teacher supposes that a good habit is a matter of obedience to his authority, he relaxes a little. A boy is late who has been making evident efforts to be punctual; the teacher good-naturedly foregoes rebuke or penalty, and the boy says to himself – “It doesn’t matter,” and begins to form the unpunctual habit. The mistake the teacher makes is to suppose that to be punctual is troublesome to the boy, so he will let him off; whereas the office of the habits of an ordered life is to make such life easy and spontaneous; the effort is confined to the first half dozen or score of occasions for doing the thing.

Consider how laborious life would be were its wheels not greased by habits of cleanliness, neatness, order, courtesy; had we to make the effort of decision about every detail of dressing and eating, coming and going, life would not be worth living. Every cottage mother knows that she must train her child in habits of decency, and a whole code of habits of propriety get themselves formed just because a breach in any such
habit causes a shock to others which few children have courage to face. Physical fitness, morals and manners, are very largely the outcome of habit; and not only so, but the habits of the religious life also become fixed and delightful and give us due support in the effort to live a godly, righteous and sober life. We need not be deterred by the fear that religious habits in a child are mechanical, uninformed by the ideas which should give them value. Let us hear what the young De Quincey felt about going to church –

“Oh Sunday mornings I went with the rest of my family to church: it was a church on the ancient model of England having aisles, galleries, organ, all things ancient and venerable, and the proportions were majestic. Here, whilst the congregation knelt through the long litany, as often as we came to that passage so beautiful amongst many that are so where God is supplicated on behalf of ‘all sick persons and young children’ and ‘that He would show His pity upon all prisoners and captives,’ I wept in secret, and raising my streaming eyes to the upper windows saw, on days when the sun was shining, a spectacle as affecting as ever prophet can have beheld ... there were the Apostles that had trampled upon earth and the glories upon earth, there were the martyrs who had borne witness to the truth through flames ... and all the time I saw through the wide central field of the window where the glass was uncolored white fleecy clouds sailing over the azure depths of the sky.”

And then the little boy had visions of sick children upon whom God would have pity –

“These visions were self-sustained, the hint from the Litany, the fragment from the clouds, those and the storied windows [104] were sufficient God speaks to children also in dreams and by the oracles that lurk in darkness; but in solitude, above all things when made vocal to the meditative heart by the truths and services of a national church, God holds with children ‘communion undisturbed.’”

With such a testimony before us, supported by gleams of recollection on our own part, we may take courage to believe that what we rightly call Divine Service is particularly appropriate to children; and will become more so as the habit of reading beautifully written books quickens their sense of style and their unconscious appreciation of the surpassingly beautiful diction of our liturgy.

We have seen the value of habit in mind and morals, religion and physical development. It is as we have seen disastrous when child or man learns to think in a groove, and shivers like an unaccustomed bather on the steps of a new notion. This danger is perhaps averted by giving children as their daily diet the wise thoughts of great minds, and of many great minds; so that they may gradually and unconsciously get the courage of their opinions. If we fail in this duty, so soon as the young people get their ‘liberty’ they will run after the first fad that presents itself; try it for a while and then take up another to be discarded in its turn, and remain uncertain and ill-guided for the rest of their days.
I hope you have enjoyed this PDF download of Finding Your Way with Charlotte Mason’s 20 Principles. Here are some ideas for you to contemplate for this Principle:

**PRINCIPLE #7: EDUCATION IS A DISCIPLINE**

1. If you had previously heard of the quote “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life,” did you have any preconceived ideas about what discipline meant?
2. What does it mean to you now that you have read more about it? How did your understanding of discipline change, if any?
3. Did any quotes really resonate with you?
4. How can the three steps help to establish good intellectual habits? The three steps being:
   - Use a Charlotte Mason Curriculum
   - The students must do the work for themselves
   - The students must narrate
5. How can you help your students do the work for themselves?
6. If you need help with narration, please see the article **Beginning Narration**.
7. Make a list of the habits that Charlotte describes in both Volume 6, Chapter 6, Part 2: Education is a Discipline, and in Volume 1, Parts 2 and 3.
8. What habits do you plan to work on with your children?
9. What habits do YOU need to work on?

**A THANK YOU**

Thank you for joining the 20 Principles Study. Please be sure to join **The Plenary Facebook Group** where you can ask questions and chat about all things CM! I look forward to chatting with you!

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A Charlotte Mason Plenary