

(A Letter to John Wesley) By His Mother

"Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it" #Pr 22:6

July 24, 1732

Dear Son,

The children were always put into a common routine in such things as they were capable of, from their birth, as in dressing, undressing, changing their linen, &c. The first quarter commonly passes in sleep. After that, they were, if possible, laid into their cradles awake, and rocked to sleep. So they were kept rocking, until it was time for them to awake. This was done to bring them to a regular pattern of sleeping. This was first three hours in the morning, then three in the afternoon and afterward two hours, until they needed none at all.

When they turned a year old (and some before) they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly. By this means they escaped abundance of correction they might otherwise have had. That most odious noise of the crying of children, was rarely heard in the house. The family usually lived in as much quietness, as if there had not been a child among them.

As soon as they were grown pretty strong, they were confined to three meals a day. At dinner their little table, and chairs were placed by ours, where they could be viewed. They were allowed to eat and drink as much as they wanted, but not to ask for any thing. If they wanted something, they used to whisper to the maid which attended them, who came and spoke to me. As soon as they could handle a knife and fork, they were seated at our table. They were never allowed to choose their food, but always made to eat such things as were provided for the family.

Mornings they had always spoon food and sometimes at nights. But whatever they had, they were never permitted to eat at those meals, of more than one thing, and of that very sparingly. Drinking or eating between meals was never allowed, unless in case of sickness, which seldom happened. Nor were they allowed to go into the kitchen to ask anything of the servants when they were eating. If it was known they did, they were certainly punished with the rod and the servants severely reprimanded.

At six, as soon as family prayer was over, they had their supper. At seven the maid washed them, and beginning at the youngest, she undressed and got them all to bed by eight. At this time she left them in their various rooms awake. For there was no such thing allowed of in our house, as sitting by a child until it fell asleep.

They were so constantly used to eat and drink what was given them, that when any of them was ill, there was no difficulty in making them take the most unpleasant medicine, for they dared not refuse it. However some of them would presently throw it up. This I mention to show that a person may be taught to take anything, though it is ever so unpleasant in his stomach.

In order to shape the minds of children, the first thing to be done is to conquer their will and bring them to an obedient spirit. To inform the understanding is a work of time, and must with children, proceed by

slow degrees, as they are able to bear it. But the subjecting the will, is a thing which must be done at once and the sooner the better. For by neglecting timely correction they will be overcome with stubbornness, and obstinacy. This is hardly ever conquered later and never without using such severity as would be as painful to me as to the child. In the esteem of the world they pass for kind and indulgent, whom I call cruel parents, who permit their children to get habits, which they know must be later broken. Indeed, some are so stupidly fond, as in fun to teach their children to do things, which a while later they have severely beaten them for doing. When a child is corrected it must be conquered. This will not be hard to do if he is not grown headstrong by too much indulgence. When the will of a child is totally subdued, and it is brought to revere and stand in awe of the parents, then a great many childish follies, and faults may be past over. Some should be overlooked and taken no notice of, and others mildly reproved. No wilful transgression ought ever to be forgiven children, without chastisement, less or more, as the nature and circumstances of the offence require.

I insist upon conquering the will of children early because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education. Without this both precept and example will be ineffectual. But when this is thoroughly done, then a child is capable of being governed by the reason and piety of its parents until his own understanding comes to maturity and the principles of religion have taken root in the mind.

I cannot yet dismiss this subject. As self-will is the root of all sin and misery, so whatever nourishes this in children, insures their later wretchedness and irreligion. Whatever checks and mortifies it, promotes their future happiness and piety. This is still more evident, if we further consider, that religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God and not our own will. Self will is the one grand impediment to our temporal and eternal happiness and no indulgences of it can be trivial, no denial unprofitable. Heaven or hell depends on this alone. So that the parent who studies to subdue it in his child, works together with God in the renewing and saving a soul. The parent who indulges it does the devil's work, makes religion impracticable, salvation unattainable, and does all that in him lies, to damn his child's body and soul for ever!

The children of this family were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord's prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bedtime constantly. When they grew older, they were given a short prayer for their parents, and some collects, a short catechism, and some portion of scripture, as their memories could handle it.

They were at a very early age before they could speak or walk made to distinguish the sabbath from other days. They were taught when very young to be still at family prayers and to ask a blessing immediately after this. They used to do this by signs before they could kneel or speak.

They were quickly made to understand, they might have nothing they cried for, and instructed to speak handsomely for what they wanted. They were not allowed to ask, even the lowest servant for anything, without saying "Please give me such a thing;" and the servant was chided, if she ever let them omit that word. Taking God's name in vain, cursing and swearing, profaneness, obscenity, rude, ill-bred names, were never heard among them. Nor were they ever permitted to call each other by their proper names without the addition of brother or sister.

None of them were taught to read until five years old, except Kezzy, in whose case I was overruled. She had more years in learning, than any of the rest had been months. The way of teaching was this. The day before a child began to learn, the house was set in order, every one's work appointed them, and a charge given, that none should come into the room from nine till twelve, or from two till five, which you know, were our school hours. One day was allowed for the child to learn its letters. Each of them did in that time know all its letters, great and small, except Molly and Nancy, who were a day and a half before they knew them perfectly. I then thought them very dull for this but since I have observed how long many children are learning the letters, I have changed my opinion. But the reason why I thought them so then was, because the rest learned so readily, and your brother Samuel, who was the first child I ever taught, learnt the alphabet in a few hours. He was five years old on the 10th of February. The next day he began to learn as soon as he knew the letters, to read starting at the first chapter of Genesis. He was taught to spell the first verse, then to read it over and over, until he could read it offhand without any hesitation. So on to the second, &c. till he took ten verses for a lesson, which he quickly did. Easter happened late that year, and by Whitsuntide he could read a chapter very well. He read continually and had such a prodigious memory that I cannot remember ever to have told him the same word twice.

What was yet stranger still was that any word he had learnt in his lesson, he knew wherever he saw it, either in his Bible or any other book. He learned very early to read an English author well.

The same method was observed with them all. As soon as they knew the letters, they were put first to spell, and read one line, then a verse. They never left it until they mastered it perfectly no matter what time it took. So one or other continued reading at school time, without any intermission, and before we left school each child read what he had learned that morning. Whenever we parted in the afternoon, they read what they had learnt that day.

There was no such thing as loud talking or playing allowed. Every one was paid attention their business for the six hours of school. It is almost incredible what a child may be taught in a quarter of a year, by a vigorous application, if it have but a tolerable capacity, and good health. Every one of these, Kezzy excepted, could read better in that time, than the most of women can do as long as they live.

Getting up out of their places or going out of the room was not permitted, unless for a good reason. Running into the yard, garden, or street without permission was always esteemed a very serious offence.

For some years we went on very well. Never were children in better disposed to piety, or in more subjection to their parents until that scattering of them after the fire into several families. In those families, they were left at full liberty to converse with the servants, which before they had always been restrained from, and to run abroad and play with any children, good or bad. They soon learned to neglect a strict observation of the sabbath, and got knowledge of several songs and bad things which before they had no notion of. That civil behaviour which made them admired when at home, by all which saw them, was in great measure lost, and a clownish accent and many rude ways were learned, which were not reformed without some difficulty.

When the house was rebuilt and the children all brought home, we entered upon a strict reform. It was then begun the custom of singing psalms at beginning and leaving school, morning and evening. Then

also that of a general retirement at five o'clock was entered upon, when the oldest took the youngest that could speak, and the second the next, to whom they read the psalms for the day, and a chapter in the New Testament. In the morning they were directed to read the psalms and a chapter in the Old Testament, after which they went to their private prayers, before they got their breakfast, or came into the family. I thank God, the custom is still preserved among us."

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Children of the King of grace,  
As from earth to heav'n ye go,  
Your Redeemer's footsteps trace,  
Follow him in all ye do.

Since your Lord in Jordan once  
Was baptiz'd to lead the way,  
Every human right renounce,  
And his voice with joy obey.

His sweet presence you will find  
Shining on you as ye go;  
Cast your fears and cares behind;  
Trust him, he will bring you through.

Hear the voice which speaks from heav'n,  
"If ye love me, keep my ways."  
You that feel your sins forgiv'n,  
Can you slight the God of grace?

Mighty Saviour, we obey

Thine august commanding voice;  
Thou hast taught our feet the way,  
In thy sanction we rejoice.

On thy promise we rely,  
Hear us from thy lofty throne,  
Shine upon us from on high,  
Bless and seal us as thy own.