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How Are We Educating Our Young Girls?



(From the introduction to "When Children Err," by Elizabeth Harrison, President, National Kindergarten and Elementary College, Chicago.)

Half a century ago, when the grandmothers of the present generation were still young mothers and the college girls of today undreamed of, Herbert Spencer startled the world with these words:

"If by some strange chance, not a vestige of us descended to the remote future, save a pile of our school books, or some college examination papers, we may imagine how puzzled an antiquary of the period would be on finding in them no sign that the learners were ever likely to be parents. 'This must have been the curriculum of their celibates,' we may fancy him concluding, 'I see here an elaborate preparation for many things; especially for reading the books of extinct nations and of co-existing nations; but I find no reference whatever to the bringing up of children. They could not have been so absurd as to omit all training for this gravest of responsibilities. Evidently, then, this was the school course of one of their monastic orders.'"

He went on to state what to him was "an astounding fact" that no instruction was given to young people concerning the treatment of their offspring, although the large majority of them would sooner or later become parents.

Since that time, those of us who have been at work in the educational field have seen the rise and spread of the kindergarten; the introduction of domestic science into high schools; the social-service courses in women's colleges; the formation of mothers' classes; the growth of the nation-wide Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Association; child welfare societies and international congresses for the same purpose; until some of us have been almost overwhelmed by the number of magazine articles and books, good, bad and indifferent, which have streamed forth from the ever busy press.

And yet—when we turn the pages of Spencer's book we read:

“Consider the young mother and her nursery legislation. But a few years ago, she was at school, where her memory was crammed with words and names and dates, and her reflective faculties scarcely in the least degree exercised, where not one idea was given her respecting the methods of dealing with the opening mind of childhood, and where her discipline did not fit her in the least for thinking out methods of her own. The intervening years have been passed in practicing music, in fancy work, in novel reading, in party-going; no thought having yet been given to the grave responsibilities of maternity; and scarcely any of that solid intellectual culture has been obtained which would be a preparation for such responsibilities. And now, see her with an unfolding human character committed to her charge. See her profound ignorance of the phenomena with which she has to deal, undertaking to do that which can be done but imperfectly even with the aid of the profoundest knowledge.

“She knows nothing about the nature of the emotions; their order of evolution, their functions, or where use ends and abuse begins. She is under the impression that some feelings are wholly bad, which is not true of any of them; and that others are good however far they may

be carried, which is also not true of any of them. And then, ignorant as she is of the structure she has to deal with, she is equally ignorant of the effects produced on it by this or that treatment."

Notwithstanding the advance made in our more intellectual communities toward the right education of woman for her chief work of "mothering," are there not yet thousands and tens of thousands of young women growing up in the state of ignorance described above? Even where educated physicians and trained nurses have done what they could to instruct the expectant mother in the laws of health necessary for the well-being of her child, and have guarded the life of her newborn infant for the first few months of its physical existence, how many of them have cautioned her concerning the **peace within** needed by the young babe during its absorbent first months? How much do they enlighten her on the value of smiles and gentle tones in the first dim awakening of her child's emotional life, and the injury done to the spiritual growth of this tender inner life by frowns and by harsh, angry tones?

Do they train her to watch for the early manifestations of inherited instincts, and tell her what is the wise guidance of inborn impulses? Do they convince her that her child's affections, interests, will-power, as well as his perceptions of the world about him, are awakening and are growing along with his digestive organs, his nervous system and his muscular strength? Do they lead her to realize that the care of these invisible but essential factors in her child's life are—just as important, shall I say?—as the case of the little body which is to be their chief instrument in after life, and how the one reacts upon the other? Which of them tells her how her child's life may be kept pure, how his sympathy for and interest in his fellow beings can be fostered? And yet so much of his future happiness and development of

character depends on his early inner attitude concerning these human relations. Froebel says an infant's first answering smile as he looks up into his mother's happy face is the dim awakening of his social instinct. Would not this banish many a frown and fret from the young mother's face if she only realized that she was thus stirring her child's emotional life?

Does doctor or nurse teach her how to meet the little one's first lie? Or what a real lie is? Have they explained to her what it means to starve a child's imagination? Or have they instructed her concerning the effect upon his intellect as well as his moral character of letting his imagination run riot? How can she guide it, and yet not check it? Has she learned from them that armaments and parliaments and arbitrations and conventions of peace advocates will not banish war and its horrors until hatred and greed and jealousy have first been conquered in the hearts of little children and a generation has been taught to realize that the great battles of life are within a man's own breast, and that the greatest wealth comes from co-operation not only in community life, but in international co-operation? Does she know how to prove to her child that man is his brother's keeper whether he will or not. The subject of "Social Psychology" is not yet half comprehended and will not be, until we train our children to practice this truth. We have talked these things, but we have not **lived** them. They have been matters of the head and not of the heart and the will, as true psychological insight teaches us they must be. These and a score of other burning questions confront us when we think of our loving but too often blundering efforts at educating our young girls.