**Education is a Discipline**

Hello- I’m Bruce McNeice – a former school Principal, Homeschool Dad, and education consultant. My passion is to impart courage to parents, and to equip and support parents in their God-given role of teaching and training their children to reach their full potential, and live an abundant life.

In this section, we will explore how this foundational concept of respecting the child as a person, has very practical implications in the area of character training, and the discipline of habit formation.

Charlotte Mason said: *“Habits are to life as rails are to a train”.* Dr Bil St Cyr defines a habit as “a propensity to respond to a given situation in a certain way. The more deeply ingrained the habit, the more consistent will be the response. We tend to do that which we have always done. And this can work for or against us”.

St Cyr explains that in Charlotte Mason’s day, children were as they are today – where some children just naturally seemed to be more co-operative, kind, self-controlled and willing to learn; others were constantly distracted, hyperactive, or tended towards inappropriate behaviour. One of the things Charlotte Mason pondered as a young teacher was – How do we lift children above their nature? She found the answer was not through either punishment or reward; but simply through the discipline of habit training. Helping the children to develop new habits that would positively form their character, so they can be more successful in life.

Whether we realise it or not, we are always training in habits. If you are an adult working with children, then you are always training in habits. The only question is – are you training in good habits or bad habits?

Charlotte Mason taught that children who are exhibiting undesirable behaviour (in character, academically, spiritually, etc) are never to be despised. Rather, the parents and educators need to realise that all children have innate possibilities for both good and bad behaviour, and so they need to be trained towards good behaviour and educational endeavour through the discipline of habit, and example. Hence, we have the saying*: “Don’t blame them – train them!”.* Their tastes or appetite needs to be trained towards the good, the true and the beautiful.

The parent or teacher should never chastise in a manner that is threatening, demeaning, aggressive, running forcefully rough-shod over the child; but instead leading and providing firm boundaries of what is acceptable because it is that which is right to do.

Just as we don’t need harsh punishment or berating, for it is only a form of external motivation, Miss Mason also warned against manipulating children through competition, prizes and rewards. The problem with prizes and rewards as a motivating factor is that, as Bill St Cyr puts it, “*what we draw them with, is what we draw them to”.* By this we mean that if you say things like *“If we get through all our Maths and English then we can have pizza and a movie on Friday afternoon”*; then what you are really saying is *“you couldn't possibly be interested in Maths and English for its own sake, so we need to bribe you to get through all this boring stuff. But what is really worthwhile is pizza and a movie”.* Do you see that what you have drawn them towards is the pizza & movie, to food and entertainment, not towards an appreciation for Maths and English? *(“What you draw them with, is what you draw them to.*”)

Prizes and rewards are all 'external motivation', whereas what we want to develop is an internal motivation, an enjoyment at doing a job well, because it is worth doing. A classic example of the use of merely external motivation is the analogy of the donkey which has a carrot dangling in front of it, and a whip or prod at the back. Enticing with a prize or punishing with whip or prod, only develops an external motivation. But children are not donkeys, stupid animals. Because humans have a spirit, they can learn to choose what is right, simply because it is right; and we do this by consistently training the child's ‘tastes’ towards all that is good, true and beautiful.

In discussing education as a discipline, Kolby Atchison notes that we should “*underscore the importance of training students in good habits as opposed to promoting mere behavioural compliance. While behaviourism focuses on reproducing particular external behaviours through systems of reward and punishment, habit training aims at the heart. Through the repeated practice of good moral habits, children develop virtuous character and the strength, with God’s help, to choose good over evil.”*

Positive character training is a purposeful activity, achieved through a combination of inspiring stories of the great men and women (and children) of character throughout the ages, as well as reading about those who were not great examples and who made poor choices.

Secondly, it is achieved through active mentoring in a challenging, rigorous and yet very personable, environment. Effective habit training does not employ either punishment or reward as a motivating factor; but does use natural logical consequences.

Children who are behaving inappropriately, need to be quietly informed that their behaviour is causing a problem, and depleting energy from the atmosphere of the home or classroom. Then they should be asked: *“So, I would like you to take some time out to think about how you are going to solve this problem and to repay the life-energy that has been depleted from the atmosphere of our family/home/classroom. But then, we want you to come back as soon as possible – as soon as you are able to peacefully and happily participate*”. (Refer to the book *‘Parenting with Love & Logic’* by Foster Cline & Jim Fay for more training on this topic).

So, in our classes and home-learning centres, the most important job of the education facilitator is to constantly and consistently train the students to form positive habits. Here is a list of some of the habits we worked on with our children, and that our teachers now focus on with their students - the moral habits alongside the academic and work habits.

* *focussed attention,*
* *neat and accurate work,*
* *emotional intelligence (eg, to carry on working when head or hand are tired; or when upset by something);*
* *orderliness (every task has a start, middle, and finish – so the students prepare their work-space and clean up afterwards)*
* *moral habits of respect for others, appropriate speech, and making good choices in difficult circumstances;*
* *a habit of appreciation/thankfulness, being polite, self-controlled and courteous.*

We cannot overstate the importance of vigilance in the area of habit training. Charlotte Mason used to talk of how the daily choices of the child built the character of the man or woman. She also said*:*

*“The mother who takes pains to endow her children with good habits secures for herself smooth and easy days; while she who lets their habits take care of themselves has a weary life of endless friction with the children. All day she is crying out, 'Do this!' and they do it not; 'Do that!' and they do the other” (Mason paraphrased in Laurio, 2007, p.136).*

At various times in the past, Karen and I have minded a number of other children and teens, or had them live with us from between four days and two years. We have found that even the child who tends to throw screaming violent tantrums when they don't get what they want, can be trained into a new habit of respectful, polite, calm obedience. Bad habits can be broken within a week if you are totally consistent; and this can be made permanent without relapses (and replaced with a positive alternative behaviour) in about 9 months.

Contemporary research on the brain and how it works (Arrowsmith-Young, 2011; Leaf, 2013; & Schwartz, 2012) confirms Mason's concept that *'habit is worth ten natures'.* By this she meant that even though a child may possess a particular 'nature' or temperament that hinders learning, this can be completely turned around by the discipline of better habit formation. Studies on 'neuroplasticity' show that although there are natural tendencies that are passed down from predecessors in hereditary 'gene packets', the brain is also able to be completely 're-wired' through the development of new habits that cause the brain to grow new nerve pathways. The old adage “you can't teach an old dog new tricks” is simply not true.

Scientists previously believed that once thought patterns had become set in early childhood, there was nothing that could be done to change a person's IQ. However, this latest research on the neuroplasticity of the brain, is showing how the things we choose to think about and do, actually recreates the physical structure of the brain (at any age), which in turn creates behavioural tendencies (habits). Charlotte Mason, a thinker ahead of her time, spoke of *“the adaptation of brain structure to habitual lines of thought”*- ie, to our habits (100 years before modern neuroscientists confirmed this phenomenon). The exciting thing about the newer research findings is that we are not a slave to our mental habits (or to our 'nature' or temperament), as the brain is constantly being renewed in its structure. Researchers have also found that academic aptitude can be significantly improved through disciplined retraining in habits of concentration, thinking, and discussion. This gives great hope for remedial students, as they are not 'destined' to fail, but can be 'rewired' for success.

Since 1996, we (Bruce & Karen McNeice) have visited and assisted over 3000 families. During that time, it has become obvious that the most successful parents are those who have put in the effort to train good habits (moral, social, academic, and practical work habits) in their children.

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Before you go – I would like to briefly pray a blessing over you.

Lord God - awesome creator of the universe, you came to set the captives free; and to give us abundant life. So, I ask your blessing over these dear folk as they launch out on their learning journey. Help them to comprehend the breadth and depth of your love for them, and open their eyes to this amazing learning journey in pursuit of all goodness, truth and beauty. Bless them, in Jesus name amen.

**Bibliography:**

* Atchison, Kolby. (2022) “Education is a Life”: Igniting a Love for Learning in the Classroom, accessed from <https://educationalrenaissance.com/2022/10/15/education-is-a-life-igniting-a-love-for-learning-in-the-classroom/> on 04-12-2022
* St Cyr, B (2021) Ambleside Schools International