

## *Masterly Inactivity*

Parental responsibility is, no doubt, the educational note of the day. People feel that they *can* bring up their children to be something more than themselves, that they *ought* to do so, and that they *must*; and it is to this keen sense of higher parental duty that the Parents' Union owes its successful activity.

We have a greater power of loving and wider scope for our love; we are more leavened by the Spirit of Christ, even when we do not recognise the source of our fuller life. It is by way of an effort toward this adjustment of power that I wish to bring before parents and teachers the subject of 'masterly inactivity'. We ought to do so much for our children, and are able to do so much for them, that we begin to think everything rests with us and that we should never intermit for a moment our conscious action on the young minds and hearts about us. Our endeavors become fussy and restless. We are too much with our children, 'late and soon.' We try to dominate them too much, even when we fail to govern, and we are unable to perceive that wise and purposeful letting alone is the best part of education.

If we admit the idea of 'masterly inactivity' as a factor in education, we shall find ourselves framing our dealings with children from this standpoint, without much conscious effort. But we must get clearly into our heads what we mean by masterly inactivity. It indicates the power to act, the desire to act, and the insight and self-restraint which forbid action. The mastery is not over ourselves only; there is also a sense of authority, which our children should be as much aware of when it is inactive as when they are doing our bidding. The sense of authority is the *sine qua non* of the parental relationship, and I am not sure that without that our activities or our inactivity will produce any great results. This element of strength is the backbone of our position. 'We could an' if we would,' and the children know it. They are free under authority, which is liberty; to be free without authority is license.

The next element in the attitude of masterly inactivity is good humour-frank, cordial, natural, good humour. This is quite a different thing from overmuch complacency, and a general giving-in to all the children's whims. The one is the outcome of strength, the other of weakness, and children are very quick to see the difference.

The next element is confidence. Parents should trust themselves more. Everything is not done by restless endeavour. The mere blessed fact of the parental relationship and of that authority which belongs to it, by right and by nature, acts upon the children as do sunshine and shower on a seed in good soil. But the fussy parent, the anxious parent, the parent who explains overmuch, who commands overmuch, who excuses overmuch, who restrains overmuch, who interferes overmuch, even the parent who is with the children overmuch, does away with the dignity and simplicity of that relationship which, like all the best and most delicate things in life, suffer by being asserted or defended.

It is a little humiliating to the best of us to see a careless, rather a selfish mother, whose children are her born slaves and run to do her bidding with delight. The moral is, not that all mothers should be careless and selfish, but that they should give their children the ease of a good deal of letting alone, and should not oppress the young people with their own anxious care. The small person of ten who wishes to know if her attainments are up to the average for her age, or he who discusses his bad habits with you and the best way of curing them, is displeasing, because one feels instinctively that the child is occupied with cares which belong to the parents only. The burden of their children's training must be borne by the parents alone.

Not only confidence in themselves, but confidence in their children, is an element of the masterly inactivity, which I venture to propose to parents as a 'blue teapot' for them 'to live up to.' Believe in the relation of parent and child, and trust the children to believe in it and fulfil it on their part. They will do so if they are not worried.

Parents and teachers must, of course, be omniscient; their children expect this of them, and a mother or father who can be hoodwinked is a person easy to reckon with in the mind of even the best child. For children are always playing a game-half of chance, half of skill; they are trying how far they can go, how much of the management of their own lives they can get for the taking, and how much they must leave in the hands of the stronger powers. Therefore the mother who is not *up to* children is at their mercy, and need expect no quarter. But she must see without watching, know without telling, be on the alert always, yet never obviously, fussily, so. This open-eyed attitude must be sphinx-like in its repose. The children must know themselves to be let alone, whether to do their own duty or to seek their own pleasure. The constraining power should be present, but passive, so that the child may not feel himself hemmed in without choice.

Children should be free to do as they ought, but know quite well in their secret heart that they are not free to do that which they ought not. The child, who, grows up with no strong sense of authority behind all his actions, but who receives many exhortations to be good and obedient and what not, is aware that he may choose either good or evil, he may obey or not obey, he may tell the truth or tell a lie; and, even when he chooses aright, he does so at the cost of a great deal of nervous wear and tear. His parents have removed from him the support of their authority in the difficult choice of right-doing, and he is left alone to make that most trying of all efforts, the effort of decisions. We are free to go in the ways of right living, and have the happy sense of liberty of choice, but the ways of transgressors are hard. We are aware of a restraining hand in the present, and of sure and certain retribution in the future. A child must be treated with full confidence, and must feel that right-coping is his own free choice, which his parents trust him to make; but he must also be very well aware of the deterrent force in the background, watchful to hinder him when he could do wrong.

A sound mind in a sound body is another factor. If the sound body is unattainable, anyway, get the sound mind. Let not the nervous, anxious, worried mother think that this

easy, happy relation with her children is for her. She may be the best mother in the world, but the thing that her children will get from her in these vexed moods is a touch of her nervousness-most catching of complaints. She will find them fractious, rebellious, unmanageable, and will be slow to realise that it is her fault; not the fault of her act but of her state.

It is not for nothing that the old painters, however diverse their ideas in other matters, all fixed upon one quality as proper to the pattern Mother. The Madonna, no matter out of whose canvas she looks at you, is always serene. This is a great truth, and we should do well to hang our walls with the Madonnas of all the early Masters if the lesson, taught through the eye, would reach with calming influence to the heart. Is this a hard saying for mothers in these anxious and troubled days? It may be hard, but it is not unsympathetic. If mothers could learn to do for themselves what they do for their children when these are overdone, we should have happier households. Let the mother go out to play! If she would only have courage to let everything go when life becomes too tense, and just take a day, or half a day, out in the fields, or with a favourite book, or in a picture gallery looking long and well at just two or three pictures, or in bed, *without the children*, life would go on far more happily for both children and parents. The mother would be able to hold herself in 'wise passiveness,' and would not fret her children by continual interference, even of hand or eye-she would let them be.

Another element is leisure. Sometimes events hurry us, and sometimes-is it not true?-we like the little excitement of a rush. Worse for children is when mother or teacher has a 'busy' day. It is one of those fussy, busy days which we women rather delight in. We do more than we can ourselves, our nerves are 'on end', what with the fatigue and what with the little excitement, and everybody in the house or the school is uncomfortable. Again, the children take advantage, so we say; the real fact being that they have caught their mother's mood and are fretful and tiresome. Nerve storms in the nursery are the probable result of the mother's little ebullition of nervous energy. Leisure for themselves and a sense of leisure in those about them is as necessary to children's well being, as it is to the strong and benign parental attitude of which I am speaking.

Other ingredients go to the making of the delectable compound we call 'masterly inactivity', but that highest form of confidence, known to us as faith, is necessary to full repose of mind and manner. When we recognise that God does not make over the bringing up of children absolutely even to their parents, but that He works Himself, in ways which it must be our care not to hinder, in the training of every child, then we shall learn passiveness, humble and wise. We shall give children space to develop on the lines of their own characters in all right ways, and shall know how to intervene effectually to prevent those errors which, also, are proper to their individual characters.

We have considered the wisdom and duty of 'a wise passiveness,' 'a masterly inactivity,' in the bringing up of children. It remains to glance in detail at the various points in a child's life, where this principle should govern us. And, first, as regards children's *play*.

There is a little danger in these days of much educational effort that children's play should be crowded out, or, what is from our present point of view the same thing, should be prescribed for and arranged until there is no more freedom of choice about play than that about work. We do not say a word against the educational value of games. We know that many things are learned in the playing-fields.

But organized games are not *play* in the sense we have in view. Boys and girls must have time to invent episodes, carry on adventures, live heroic lives, lay sieges and carry forts, even if the fortress be an old armchair; and in these affairs the elders must neither meddle nor make. They must be content to know that they do not understand, and, what is more, that they carry with them a chill breath of reality which sweeps away illusions. Think what it means to a general in command of his forces to be told by some intruder into the play-world to tie his shoe-strings! There is an idea afloat that children require to be taught to play-to play at being little fishes and lambs and butterflies. No doubt they enjoy these games which are made for them, but there is a serious danger. In this matter the child who goes too much on crutches never learns to walk; he who is most played with by his elders has little power of inventing plays for himself; and so he misses that education which comes to him when allowed to go his own way and act.

In their *work*, too, we are too apt to interfere with children. With our present theories of education it seems that we cannot give much scope for personal initiative. There is so much task-work to be done, so many things that must be, not learned, but learned *about*, that it is only now and then a child gets the chance to produce himself in his work. But let us use such opportunities as come in our way. Children develop an amazing capacity for drawing, perhaps because so soon as they are familiar with the outlines of the flower and foliage of a given plant, for example, they are encouraged to form designs with these elements. These children develop themselves a great deal on which they write tales and poems, and essays, not prescribed work, but self-chosen. The children's thought is stimulated, and they feel they have it in them to say much about a doll's ball, Peter, the school cat, or whatever other subject strikes their fancy.

In another way, more within our present control, we do not let children alone enough in their work. We prod them continually and do not let them stand or fall by their own efforts. One of the features, and one of the disastrous features, of modern society, is that, in our laziness, we depend upon prodders and encourage a vast system of prodding. We are prodded to our social duties, to our charitable duties, and to our religious duties. If we pay a subscription to a charity, we expect the secretary to prod us when it becomes due. If we attend a meeting, do we often do so of our own spontaneous will, or because somebody asks us to go and reminds us half a dozen times of the day and the hour? Perhaps it is a result of the hurry of the age that there is a curious division of labour, and society falls into those who prod and those who are prodded. It is more true, perhaps, to say that we all prod, and that we are all prodded. Now, an occasional prick is stimulating and wholesome, but the *vis inertiae* of human nature is such that we would rather lean up against a wall of spikes than not lean at all. What we must guard against in the training

of children is the danger of their getting into the habit of being prodded to every duty and every effort. Our whole system of school policy is largely a system of prods. Marks, prizes, exhibitions, are all prods; and a system of prodding is apt to obscure the meaning of *must* and *ought* for the boy or girl who gets into the habit of mental and moral lolling up against his prods.

It would be better for boys and girls to suffer the consequences of not doing their work, now and then, than to do it because they are so urged and prodded on all hands that they have no volition in the matter. The more we are prodded the lazier we get, and the less capable of the effort of will which should carry us to, and nearly carry us through, our tasks. Boys and girls are, on the whole, good, and desirous to do their duty. If we expect the tale of bricks to be delivered at the due moment without urging or entreating, rewarding or punishing, in nine cases out of ten we shall get what we look for. Where many of us err is in leaning too much to our own understanding and our own efforts, and not trusting sufficiently to the dutiful impulse which will carry children through the work they are expected to do.

With regard to the choice of friends and companions, again, we should train children so that we should be able to honour them with a generous confidence; and if we give them such confidence we shall find that they justify it. The mother who brings forward questions of class, appearance, etc., as affecting her children's choice of friends, does her best to create that obtuseness as to vital points of character which is the cause of most shipwrecked lives. In this matter, as in all others, the parent's inactivity must be masterly; that is, the young people should read approval or disapproval very easily, and should be able to trace one or the other to general principles of character and conduct, though nothing be said or done or even looked in disparagement of the ally of the hour.

We have room to mention one more point in which all of us, who have the care of young people, would do well to practise a wise 'letting alone.' There are burning questions in the air, seething opinions in men's minds: as to religion, politics, science, literature, art, as regards every kind of social effort, we are disposed to hold strenuous opinions. The person who has not kept himself in touch with the movement of the thought of the world in all these matters has little cause to pride himself. It is our duty to form opinions carefully, and to hold them tenaciously in so far as the original grounds of our conclusions remain unshaken. But what we have no right to do, is to pass these opinions on to our children. We all know that nothing is easier than to make vehement partisans of young people, in any cause heartily adopted by their elders. Mothers will be saved some anguish if they give their children the living principles of the Christian faith, which are not matters of opinion, and allow them to accept her particular practice in their youth without requiring them to take their stand on Evangelical opinions as offering practically the one way of salvation.

In politics, again, let children be fired with patriotism and instructed in the duties of citizenship, but, if they can be kept out of the party strife of an election, well for them.

Children are far more likely to embrace the views of their parents, when they are ripe to form opinions, if these have not been forced upon them in early youth when their lack of knowledge and experience makes it impossible for them to form opinions at first hand. Only by 'masterly inactivity', 'wise passiveness,' able 'letting alone,' can a child be trained-  
"To reverence his conscience as his king."

We all admire spontaneity, but this grace, even in children, is not an indigenous wild-flower. It is the result of training,-of pleasant talks upon the general principles of conduct, and wise 'letting alone' as to the practice of these principles. To parents, who have in their hands the making of family customs, it belongs especially to beware-  
"Lest one good custom should corrupt the world."

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