

PSYCHOLOGY AND CHILD LIFE

[Paper read before the Auckland Teachers' Conference by a Sister of Notre Dame des Missions.]

(Concluded from last week.)

Under the modern obsession of physical hygiene, classrooms, as a rule, have black desks, and grey walls more devoid of ornament than those of a mortuary chamber; and this to the end, not only that "microbes" may be kept in their place, but also that the starved and famishing spirit of the child may not be distracted while the teacher by means of oratorical art and laborious expedients endeavors to obtain from his petrified pupils what only Our Lord Himself seems to have been able to do—namely, entrance their attention for hours at a time. We read that even when on one occasion the fiery St. Paul preached for some length of time, one man at least went to sleep, and consequently fell out of the window and was killed. Now, modern psychology teaches that beauty of surroundings both promotes concentration of thought and offers refreshment to the tired spirit. Indeed, our churches, which are *par excellence* places of meditation and repose for the life of the soul, have called upon the highest inspirations of genius to gather every beauty within their precincts. No ornament distracts a child really absorbed in his task; nay, if we wish to keep in touch with the principles of science we should say that the place best adapted to the full life of man is an artistic environment. Moreover, if we are to do justice to our children we must be prepared to lavish money in obtaining for them books in which the illustrations are all beautiful and attractive, as well as inspiring; and the printing and paper of the best. The day of cheap books, unillustrated and badly printed, has gone indeed; but we do not yet realise how defective we are in our supply of books for supplementing our teaching of such subjects as history and geography, and how much our teaching of these subjects suffers in consequence. I do not mean by this text books of dry facts—they are plentiful enough—but books for illustration and amplification. Such books are one of the most serious wants of the day. As regards religious pictures, the idea carried out in the Auckland *Catholic Magazine* of reproducing our masterpieces and giving a description of them is for this reason excellent. It is said that one picture a child holds in his hand as his own property is worth more to him than a hundred masterpieces hung on the wall. Only the best pictures should adorn the school walls.

But in this matter of environment we have another factor to consider. Furniture for children, their tables and chairs, should be light, not only that they may be easily carried about by childish arms, but because their very fragility is of educational value. The same consideration should lead us to give children china plates and glass drinking vessels, for these objects become the denouncers of rough, disorderly, and undisciplined movements. Thus the child is led to correct himself, and he accordingly trains himself not to knock against, overturn, and break things; softening his movements more and more, he gradually becomes their perfectly free and self-possessed director. He becomes, we say, "well bred." In the same way the child will accustom himself to do his utmost not to soil the beautiful things which enliven his surroundings. Thus he makes progress in his own perfection, or, in other words, it is thus he achieves a perfect co-ordination of his voluntary movements. It is the same process by which, having enjoyed silence and music, he will do all in his power to avoid discordant noises, which will have become unpleasant to his educated ear. On the other hand, when a child comes into collision a hundred times a day with an enormously heavy iron-bound desk which a porter would have difficulty in moving, when he makes thousands of invisible ink-stains on a black bench, when he lets a tin or enamel plate fall to the ground a hundred times without breaking it, he remains immersed in his sea of defects without perceiving them; his environment, meanwhile, is so constructed as to hide and

therefore to encourage his errors, with Mephistophelian hypocrisy.

Coming now to the child himself, we shall take as our first point the *psychical basis of attention*. Just as there is in every child a primitive internal impulse which moves him to endeavor to obtain the satisfaction of his physical needs, so there is in every normal child a hunger and thirst of the soul and mind; in other words, psychical activities which must be satisfied. To quench thirst, it is not sufficient to see or to sip water; the thirsty man must drink his fill—that is to say, must take in the quantity his organism requires; so to satisfy a child's psychical hunger and thirst, it is not sufficient merely to see things cursorily, much less merely "to hear them described"; it is necessary to possess them and to use them to the full, if the needs of the inner life are to be satisfied. In modern psychology this fact stands revealed as the basis of all psychical construction, the sole secret of education. The paramount object in all lessons, in the planning out of all our programmes, is not that knowledge may be acquired, except indeed as a secondary and necessary result, but that the child may have scope for the exercise and development of the powers of his mind and soul. The great proof that much of our former teaching was not fulfilling this essential function was only too plainly manifested by the difficulty we experienced in securing the attention of our pupils, together with the wasted energy they expended on what we termed "wrong" objects.

There is in each individual a special attitude towards external things which responds to the needs of his inner life. Thus the artist sees a preponderance of colors in the world, the musician will be attracted by sounds. That this is so is obvious from the fact that people brought up in the same environment may develop on totally different lines, each taking from his environment as far as possible what suited his intimate individual aptitudes, just as various plants in a garden obtain different nourishment from the same soil. As a result of the recognition of this interior spiritual force working within the child as the basis of all the problems of securing attention, the work of the teacher now consists, not in a vain endeavor to make all his rose bushes dandelions, or *vice versa*; but in bestowing a sufficient variety of exercises to meet the psychical needs of his various pupils, granting them at the same time sufficient liberty to exercise their powers according to the needs of their particular nature. When, however, the child's power of fixing his attention has been developed by suitable exercises, it will be found that he has far greater capacity for attending even to un congenial objects.

The following instance is an illustration of the possibility of transferring the power of attention cultivated by one kind of object to that of another. In a certain school there was a little girl who could not control her attention sufficiently to carry a glass of water, even only half full, without spilling it; so much so that she turned from such a task, knowing that she could not accomplish it. One day she became absorbed in work of another kind; then, rising suddenly from it, as though she felt she had developed a new power, she began carrying glasses of water with the greatest ease; and has found a special pleasure in doing so ever since.

THE WILL.—The unanimous reports of the educationalists from all parts of the world who attended the last pedagogic and psychological international congresses lamented the "lack of character" in the young, as constituting the greatest danger to the race. Now, character is essentially a question of will, and the truth of the great maxim that "to will" is "to do" impresses us more and more as we grow older and gives that decision of character that makes for success in any walk of life. Here again the doctrine of liberty preached by the new psychology offers the great remedy needed; for it is only by *exercise* that the will can be developed and strengthened. It would certainly never occur to anyone that in order to develop right and graceful movements in our children it would be well first of all to keep them absolutely motionless, covering their limbs, so to speak, with cement until the muscles become