

NATURAL EDUCATION

By

WINIFRED SACKVILLE STONER

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH SERIES

EDITED BY M. V. O'SHEA

Professor of Education, The University of Wisconsin



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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

During the last three or four years, the newspapers and magazines of the country have given much space to the discussion of a group of so-called precocious children. Probably no one in this group has received more attention than Winifred Sackville Stoner, Jr. Her reported abilities have been analyzed by teachers and students of child development; and there has been a wide-spread desire to have more accurate and intimate knowledge of her actual attainments and her education than could be obtained through the public press. The writer of these lines, in projecting this series of volumes on *Childhood and Youth*, determined to secure a book, if possible, describing the training and abilities of Miss Stoner. With this end in view, he, in company with Dean Chambers of the University of Pittsburgh, paid a visit to the Stoner family in Pittsburgh, during the summer of 1913. Contrary to their expectations, they found young Miss Stoner far above the typical child of her age in physical vigor and stamina. At first glance she looked more like a child of nature than an intellectual prodigy. During the interview, and at the request of the visitors, she gave an exhibition of her linguistic, musical and artistic ability. She also recited some of her original jingles, constructed for the purpose of helping her remember dates and facts in history, rules in language and mathematics, and so on.

The visitors were so favorably impressed with the child's development, which seemed entirely natural although exceptional, that they both thought an account of her training should in some manner be put into print, so that parents, teachers and students of

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child nature and education could have access to it. So the writer proposed to Mrs. Stoner, who has been the girl's chief teacher, that she should write this book. She was told that what was wanted was a simple, informal, concrete and unbiased statement of just what methods she employed in the training of her daughter which had produced such unusual results. "Tell the story in your book just as you are telling it to me," said the writer. "Be perfectly frank about it, even if you do rebel against bringing your domestic affairs into such publicity. Your daughter has already been discussed in the papers anyway, and it has really become necessary for you to describe how she has been trained in order to correct erroneous impressions, and to put a stop to certain wild conjectures which are circulating through the press."

So after some urging, Mrs. Stoner agreed to prepare this volume. She has succeeded in doing what was requested of her. She has given an intimate and detailed account of the methods she has used with her daughter, from the cradle up to the ninth or tenth year. She has done this in a wholly unaffected manner, and in an optimistic, cheerful and gracious spirit. During the last few years, several persons who have trained precocious children have appeared in print in condemnation of prevailing methods of education in the home and in the school. There appears to be a strange influence which a precocious child exerts upon his parents and teachers. They contract an almost morbid hostility to existing educational institutions and those who administer them. Their books are full of denunciation and bitterness. But there is not a word of this sort of thing in the present volume. Mrs. Stoner's book is wholly constructive and suggestive. She is writing on *natural* education, and she has made

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her treatment illustrative of the thing that she is writing about. She has had very unusual opportunities for travel and for reading in educational and general literature, which fact will be readily apparent to any one who may read this book.

Probably every reader of these lines is familiar with Rousseau's *Émile*. The plans for the education of this mythical boy have exerted an extraordinary influence upon educational theory in many countries. But Rousseau's book is purely theoretical. It was probably written behind a desk, without any actual contact with children. Mrs. Stoner's book is written in as attractive a style as *Émile*; and it has the advantage of being an account of what has actually been accomplished, rather than an exposition of what an educational philosopher thinks would be desirable in bringing up a child. It is not beyond reason to expect that the present volume will do for the practise of teaching in home and in school what *Émile* has done for the theory of education.

Natural Education will be found to be a treasure house of practical devices for getting children to master useful knowledge in the play spirit. It would not be appropriate here to enter into a psychological analysis of Mrs. Stoner's methods and results; but it will be appropriate to point out that she has shown exceptional resourcefulness in devising captivating games of a competitive kind, to carry on which involves the learning of facts of educational value. The present writer has no doubt that Winifred Stoner's rapid learning of the usual branches of education has been due in large part to the fact that her play life has involved the use of subjects of educational value, while the typical child does not have an opportunity to play games in which he can utilize his geography

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or Latin or history or geometry or spelling, or anything of the kind.

There is no attempt in this volume to discuss the question of the desirability of early mastery of the formal subjects of study. There will probably be some readers who will doubt the wisdom of teaching certain things as early as Mrs. Stoner taught them to her daughter. But it is not at all vital to the success of the methods employed whether they are used the first year of age, or deferred to the fifth year. The problem of the age at which a particular thing should be taught is relatively immaterial, as far as the matters presented in this book are concerned. The purpose has been to describe these methods, and to indicate how they have worked out in the case of a particular child. They would in all likelihood work out in much the same way with any child, though they might have to be postponed to a somewhat later age, and employed oftener and impressed by more frequent repetitions. Again, the question of inherited ability has not been considered in this volume. Doubtless some persons will think that Winifred Stoner's development has been due, in considerable part, to inherited genius. The settlement of this question would be of relatively little value for the parent or teacher, because the methods which have proved successful with the subject of this book would unquestionably be of value in the training of all children, though they might not profit by them as fully or as readily as has Winifred Stoner.

M. V. O'SHEA.

Madison, Wisconsin.

PREFACE

At the beginning of this century benevolent people were supposed to be engaged in building churches and founding universities for young men and women, but outside of helping to maintain asylums nothing was ever done for children. Now the young child is a topic of interest to philanthropists as well as to all mothers. Children are being guarded not alone from physical dangers, but wise men and women are looking into the child's intellectual and moral welfare.

The subject of early child training through environment and play methods seems to be one of vital interest to most parents. Mothers who realize that the glory of their country, as well as the happiness of their children, depends upon the child's earliest training, are giving up bridge parties and pink teas while striving to direct their little ones into paths leading to happiness and success.

During the last five years I have received hundreds of letters from mothers living in all parts of the world, who have asked for information concerning the methods used in training my little daughter, Winifred Sackville Stoner, Jr., so that she was able to write jingles and stories for newspapers and magazines at the age of five years.

I have devoted many hours in striving to answer these letters so that the inquiring mothers could have some idea of natural educational methods, but it has been impossible to give full explanations to each mother.

In response to the plea that I give my ideas to the world in book form, I hesitated, not wishing to use

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my child as an illustrative example of an educational system. All mothers can sympathize with Mère Corbeau who thought her own crowlets so wondrously fair, and as mothers they can realize my difficult position in striving to speak of the apple of my eye as a psychological problem.

However, as mothers continue to ask me for information, I feel it is my duty to help them make the pathway to knowledge one of pleasure rather than drudgery. With this object in view and because I dearly love children and long to see them happy in the pursuit of knowledge, I am trying to tell how I trained my little daughter, who is not a genius (as some believe) but only a healthy, normal, happy child possessed of unusual physical strength and more knowledge than most children of her age through the help of living close to "Mother Nature," and in the company of the great giants "Observation" and "Concentration," and the spritely fairy "Interest," assisted by mortals' best friend, "Imagination."

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