

# The Education of the Child

by Ellen Key

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Edward Bok, Editor of the "Ladies' Home Journal," writes:

"Nothing finer on the wise education of the child has ever been brought into print. To me this chapter is a perfect classic; it points the way straight for every parent and it should find a place in every home in America where there is a child."

### The Education of the Child

Goethe showed long ago in his Werther a clear understanding of the significance of individualistic and psychological training, an appreciation which will mark the century of the child. In this work he shows how the future power of will lies hidden in the characteristics of the child, and how along with every fault of the child an

uncorrupted germ capable of producing good is enclosed. "Always," he says, "I repeat the golden words of the teacher of mankind, 'if ye do not become as one of these,' and now, good friend, those who are our equals, whom we should look upon as our models, we treat as subjects; they should have no will of their own; do we have none? Where is our prerogative? Does it consist in the fact that we are older and more experienced? Good God of Heaven! Thou seest old and young children, nothing else. And in whom Thou hast more joy, Thy Son announced ages ago. But people believe in Him and do not hear Him--that, too, is an old trouble, and they model their children after themselves." The same criticism might be applied to our present educators, who constantly have on their tongues such words as evolution, individuality, and natural tendencies, but do not heed the new commandments in which they say they believe. They continue to educate as if they believed still in the natural depravity of man, in original sin, which may be bridled, tamed, suppressed, but not changed. The new belief is really equivalent to

Goethe's thoughts given above, i.e., that almost every fault is but a hard shell enclosing the germ of virtue. Even men of modern times still follow in education the old rule of medicine, that evil must be driven out by evil, instead of the new method, the system of allowing nature quietly and slowly to help itself, taking care only that the surrounding conditions help the work of nature. This is education.

Neither harsh nor tender parents suspect the truth expressed by Carlyle when he said that the marks of a noble and original temperament are wild, strong emotions, that must be controlled by a discipline as hard as steel. People either strive to root out passions altogether, or they abstain from teaching the child to get them under control.

To suppress the real personality of the child, and to supplant it with another personality continues to be a pedagogical crime common to those who announce loudly that education should only develop the real individual nature of the child.

They are still not convinced that egoism on the part of the child is justified. Just as little are they convinced of the possibility that evil can be changed into good.

Education must be based on the certainty that faults cannot be atoned for, or blotted out, but must always have their consequences. At the same time, there is the other certainty that through progressive evolution, by slow adaptation to the conditions of environment they may be transformed. Only when this stage is reached will education begin to be a science and art. We will then give up all belief in the miraculous effects of sudden interference; we shall act in the psychological sphere in accordance with the principle of the indestructibility of matter. We shall never believe that a characteristic of the soul can be destroyed. There are but two possibilities. Either it can be brought into subjection or it can be raised up to a higher plane.

Madame de Stael's words show much insight when she says that only the people who can play with children are able to educate them. For success in training children the first condition is to become as a child oneself, but this means no assumed childishness, no condescending baby-talk that the child immediately sees through and deeply abhors. What it does mean is to be as entirely and simply taken up with the child as the child himself is absorbed by his life. It means to treat the child as really one's equal, that is, to show him the same consideration, the same kind confidence one shows to an adult. It means not to influence the child to be what we ourselves desire him to become but to be influenced by the impression of what the child himself is; not to treat the child with deception, or by the exercise of force, but with the seriousness and sincerity proper to his own character. Somewhere Rousseau says that all education has failed in that nature does not fashion parents as educators nor children for the sake of education. What would happen if we finally succeeded in following the directions of nature, and recognised that the great

secret of education lies hidden in the maxim,"do not educate"?

Not leaving the child in peace is the greatest evil of present-day methods of training children. Education is determined to create a beautiful world externally and internally in which the child can grow. To let him move about freely in this world until he comes into contact with the permanent boundaries of another's right will be the end of the education of the future. Only then will adults really obtain a deep insight into the souls of children, now an almost inaccessible kingdom. For it is a natural instinct of self-preservation which causes the child to bar the educator from his innermost nature. There is the person who asks rude questions; for example, what is the child thinking about? a question which almost invariably is answered with a black or a white lie. The child must protect himself from an educator who would master his thoughts and inclinations, or rudely handle them, who without consideration betrays or makes ridiculous his

most sacred feelings, who exposes faults or praises characteristics before strangers, or even uses an open-hearted, confidential confession as an occasion for reproof at another time.

The statement that no human being learns to understand another, or at least to be patient with another, is true above all of the intimate relation of child and parent in which, understanding, the deepest characteristic of love, is almost always absent.

Parents do not see that during the whole life the need of peace is never greater than in the years of childhood, an inner peace under all external unrest. The child has to enter into relations with his own infinite world, to conquer it, to make it the object of his dreams. But what does he experience? Obstacles, interference, corrections, the whole livelong day. The child is always required to leave something alone, or to do something different, to find something different, or want something different from

what he does, or finds, or wants. He is always shunted off in another direction from that towards which his own character is leading him. All of this is caused by our tenderness, vigilance, and zeal, in directing, advising, and helping the small specimen of humanity to become a complete example in a model series.

I have heard a three-year-old child characterised as "trying" because he wanted to go into the woods, whereas the nursemaid wished to drag him into the city. Another child of six years was disciplined because she had been naughty to a playmate and had called her a little pig,--a natural appellation for one who was always dirty. These are typical examples of how the sound instincts of the child are dulled. It was a spontaneous utterance: of the childish heart when a small boy, after an account of the heaven of good children, asked his mother whether she did not believe that, after he had been good a whole week in heaven, he might be allowed to go to hell on Saturday evening to play with the bad little boys there.

The child felt in its innermost consciousness that he had a right to be naughty, a fundamental right which is accorded to adults; and not only to be naughty, but to be naughty in peace, to be left to the dangers and joys of naughtiness.

To call forth from this "unvirtue" the complimentary virtue is to overcome evil with good. Otherwise we overcome natural strength by weak means and obtain artificial virtues which will not stand the tests which life imposes.

It seems simple enough when we say that we must overcome evil with good, but practically no process is more involved, or more tedious, than to find actual means to accomplish this end. It is much easier to say what one shall not do than what one must do to change self-will into strength of character, slyness into prudence, the desire to please into amiability, restlessness into personal initiative. It can only be brought about by recognising that evil, in so

far as it is not atavistic or perverse, is as natural and indispensable as the good, and that it becomes a permanent evil only through its one-sided supremacy.

The educator wants the child to be finished at once, and perfect. He forces upon the child an unnatural degree of self-mastery, a devotion to duty, a sense of honour, habits that adults get out of with astonishing rapidity. Where the faults of children are concerned, at home and in school, we strain at gnats, while children daily are obliged to swallow the camels of grown people.

The art of natural education consists in ignoring the faults of children nine times out of ten, in avoiding immediate interference, which is usually a mistake, and devoting one's whole vigilance to the control of the environment in which the child is growing up, to watching the education which is allowed to go on by itself. But educators who, day in and day out, are consciously transforming the environment and themselves are still a rare product. Most

people live on the capital and interest of an education, which perhaps once made them model children, but has deprived them of the desire for educating themselves. Only by keeping oneself in constant process of growth, under the constant influence of the best things in one's own age, does one become a companion half-way good enough for one's children.

To bring up a child means carrying one's soul in one's hand, setting one's feet on a narrow path, it means never placing ourselves in danger of meeting the cold look on the part of the child that tells us without words that he finds us insufficient and unreliable. It means the humble realisation of the truth that the ways of injuring the child are infinite, while the ways of being useful to him are few. How seldom does the educator remember that the child, even at four or five years of age, is making experiments with adults, seeing through them, with marvellous shrewdness making his own valuations and reacting sensitively to each impression. The slightest mistrust, the

smallest unkindness, the least act of injustice or contemptuous ridicule, leave wounds that last for life in the finely strung soul of the child. While on the other side unexpected friendliness, kind advances, just indignation, make quite as deep an impression on those senses which people term as soft as wax but treat as if they were made of cowhide.

Relatively most excellent was the old education which consisted solely in keeping oneself whole, pure, and honourable. For it did not at least depreciate personality, although it did not form it. It would be well if but a hundredth part of the pains now taken by parents were given to interference with the life of the child and the rest of the ninety and nine employed in leading, without interference, in acting as an unforeseen, an invisible providence through which the child obtains experience, from which he may draw his own conclusions. The present practice is to impress one's own discoveries, opinions, and principles on the child by constantly

directing his actions. The last thing to be realised by the educator is that he really has before him an entirely new soul, a real self whose first and chief right is to think over the things with which he comes in contact. By a new soul he understands only a new generation of an old humanity to be treated with a fresh dose of the old remedy. We teach the new souls not to steal, not to lie, to save their clothes, to learn their lessons, to economise their money, to obey commands, not to contradict older people, say their prayers, to fight occasionally in order to be strong. But who teaches the new souls to choose for themselves the path they must tread? Who thinks that the desire for this path of their own can be so profound that a hard or even mild pressure towards uniformity can make the whole of childhood a torment.

The child comes into life with the inheritance of the preceding members of the race; and this inheritance is modified by adaptation to the environment. But the child shows also individual variations from the type of the

species, and if his own character is not to disappear during the process of adaptation, all self-determined development of energy must be aided in every way and only indirectly influenced by the teacher, who should understand how to combine and emphasise the results of this development.

Interference on the part of the educator, whether by force or persuasion, weakens this development if it does not destroy it altogether.

The habits of the household, and the child's habits in it must be absolutely fixed if they are to be of any value. Amiel truly says that habits are principles which have become instincts, and have passed over into flesh and blood. To change habits, he continues, means to attack life in its very essence, for life is only a web of habits.

Why does everything remain essentially the same from generation to generation? Why do highly civilised Christian people continue to plunder one another and call

it exchange, to murder one another en masse, and call it nationalism, to oppress one another and call it statesmanship?

Because in every new generation the impulses supposed to have been rooted out by discipline in the child, break forth again, when the struggle for existence--of the individual in society, of the society in the life of the state--begins. These passions are not transformed by the prevalent education of the day, but only repressed. Practically this is the reason why not a single savage passion has been overcome in humanity. Perhaps man-eating may be mentioned as an exception. But what is told of European ship companies or Siberian prisoners shows that even this impulse, under conditions favourable to it, may be revived, although in the majority of people a deep physical antipathy to man-eating is innate. Conscious incest, despite similar deviations, must also be physically contrary to the majority, and in a number of women, modesty--the unity between body and soul in relation to love--is an

incontestable provision of nature. So too a minority would find it physically impossible to murder or steal. With this list I have exhausted everything which mankind, since its conscious history began, has really so intimately acquired that the achievement is passed on in its flesh and blood. Only this kind of conquest can really stand up against temptation in every form.

A deep physiological truth is hidden in the use of language when one speaks of unchained passions; the passions, under the prevailing system of education, are really only beasts of prey imprisoned in cages.

While fine words are spoken about individual development, children are treated as if their personality had no purpose of its own, as if they were made only for the pleasure, pride, and comfort of their parents; and as these aims are best advanced when children become like every one else, people usually begin by attempting to make them respectable and useful members of society.