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*Education is  
an atmosphere, a discipline,  
a life*



# *Education Is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life*

*Charlotte Mason's Three-Pronged Approach to Education*

by Sonya Shafer

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## *Chapter 1*

### *Education Is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life*

Many of you are making plans, doing research, and trying to get a handle on upcoming subjects, possibly even as you finish current ones. Some of you are preparing to enter those huge (often intimidating) vendor halls at homeschooling conventions near you. You might even be experiencing what we call around our house Bad Mommy Syndrome as you seek to figure out what needs to be changed, what needs to be tweaked, and what you need to stand firm on (“or should I?”). It’s easy to feel overwhelmed as different people recommend different directions you should head with your precious children.

In the midst of all the commotion, remember three words. These three words lay the foundation to the Charlotte Mason way of homeschooling. These three words can guide all those decisions that need to be made. These three words are understandable and paint a complete picture of home education. These three words will help you!

The three words are “atmosphere,” “discipline,” and “life.” Charlotte Mason used those three words to describe her approach to education. She said, “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.”

#### *Education Is*

Now those three words are quite a bit different from the other three words people will commonly give you when talking about education. Most people equate education with the three R’s: reading, writing, and rithmetic. But Charlotte had a much broader scope of all that contributes to a child’s education. You see, education is not just What do I need to know to pass the test? Education, according to Webster, involves training

by both formal instruction and supervised practice; it includes all that we do to help our children develop mentally, morally, and aesthetically; it entails our persuading our children to feel, believe, or act in a desired way.

This all-around picture is what Charlotte had in mind when she said that education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life.

By “atmosphere,” Charlotte spoke of the environment our children grow up in. She knew that the ideas that rule our lives, as parents, will have a profound impact on our children. Some of those rules we are completely aware of; others we may not realize are controlling our lives. Nevertheless, “the child breathes the atmosphere emanating from his parents; that of the ideas which rule their own lives” (Vol. 2, p. 247).

By “discipline,” Charlotte emphasized the importance of training our children in good habits—habits that will serve them well as they grow. In fact, she likened good habits to railroad tracks that parents lay down and upon which the child may travel with ease into his adult life. Good habits are a powerful influence on our children and must play an important part in their education. “It rests with [the parent] to consider well the tracks over which the child should travel with profit and pleasure” (Vol. 1, p. 109).

By “life,” Charlotte wanted to remind us that “all the thought we offer to our children shall be *living* thought; no mere dry summaries of facts will do” (Vol. 2, p. 277). And the methods that Charlotte used presented each subject’s material as living ideas. Here is where the reading, writing, and arithmetic come in, along with all the other school subjects. But notice two important points: first, they are presented as living thoughts; and second, those school subjects occupy only one-third of the big picture of education.

### *Three-Pronged Approach*

Think about it. If we give our children only the atmosphere in our homes, they will learn only what we already know, and our focus may turn to events and activities at the expense of teaching our children how to think and read for instruction themselves.

However, if we give them only the discipline of habits, they will have good character but will be lacking in mental development.

And if we give them only academics, we might very well raise smart delinquents or, at the very least, burden our children with intellectual exhaustion. All three components of Charlotte's three-pronged approach are vital in the education of our children.

Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life. What a well-balanced, all-around approach!

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*“Education is a discipline—that is, the discipline of the good habits in which the child is trained. Education is a life, nourished upon ideas; and education is an atmosphere—that is, the child breathes the atmosphere emanating from his parents; that of the ideas which rule their own lives”*  
(Vol. 2, p. 247).

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## Chapter 2

### *Education Is an Atmosphere*

*“I just don’t know what to do with my son,” Evelyn confided. “We’re constantly butting heads, which leads to a yelling contest and both of us storming out of the room. It’s a wonder we get any schoolwork done!”*

Evelyn would find help in Charlotte’s counsel that “Education is an atmosphere.” We all know how the atmosphere at home can affect our day of school. In Evelyn’s case, an atmosphere of conflict is prevailing.

The fact is that much of what a child learns he picks up by watching and listening to those around him. Remember the saying, “More things are caught than taught”? The ideas that rule your life as a parent will rub off on your child.

So the question begs to be asked, “What ideas rule your life?” Is your child learning that anger is the way to respond to conflict, or is he soaking up an atmosphere of peacemaking? Is he being educated in the “art” of worry and anxiety, or is he learning to trust the Lord even in the small things of life? Does he think that learning stops when you get your diploma, or is he seeing your desire and love for learning as an adult?

It’s easy to get caught up in the reading, writing, and arithmetic and forget that our children are watching us day in and day out. Now, I don’t believe that Charlotte intended to dump a guilt trip on parents by stating that education is an atmosphere. She just wanted to make sure we realize that the ideas that rule our lives play a big role in what our children learn from us. The truth is that all of us need that gentle reminder every so often to nudge us back on the right path.



## *Charlotte's Thoughts on Education Is an Atmosphere*

### *1. Children should grow up in a natural home setting, not an artificial, adapted "child environment."*

"By the saying, Education is an atmosphere, it is not meant that a child should be isolated in what may be called a 'child environment,' especially adapted and prepared; but that we should take into account the educational value of his natural home atmosphere, both as regards persons and things, and should let him live freely among his proper conditions. It stultifies a child to bring down his world to a 'child's' level" (Vol. 1, Preface).

### *2. Character traits can be learned through the atmosphere of the home.*

"Habits of gentleness, courtesy, kindness, candour, respect for other people, or—habits quite other than these, are inspired by the child as the very atmosphere of his home, the air he lives in and must grow by" (Vol. 1, p. 137).

### *3. We must be careful how we live, because our children will pick up attitudes and ideas from us that will affect them the rest of their lives.*

"Ideas may invest as an atmosphere, rather than strike as a weapon. 'The idea may exist in a clear, distinct, definite form, as that of a circle in the mind of a geometrician; or it may be a mere instinct, a vague appetency towards something, . . . like the impulse which fills the young poet's eyes with tears, he knows not why.' To excite this 'appetency towards something'—towards things lovely, honest, and of good report, is the earliest and most important ministry of the educator. How shall these indefinite ideas which manifest themselves in appetency be imparted? They are not to be given of set purpose, nor taken at set times. They are held in that thought-environment which surrounds the child as an atmosphere, which he breathes as his breath of life; and this atmosphere in which the child inspires his unconscious ideas of right living emanates from his parents. Every look of gentleness and tone of reverence, every word of kindness and act of help, passes into the thought-environment, the very atmosphere which the child breathes; he does not think of these things, may never think of them, but all his life long they excite that 'vague appetency towards something' out of which most of his actions spring. Oh, the wonderful and dreadful presence of the little child in the midst!

“That he should take direction and inspiration from all the casual life about him, should make our poor words and ways the starting-point from which, and in the direction of which, he develops—this is a thought which makes the best of us hold our breath. There is no way of escape for parents; they must needs be as ‘inspirers’ to their children, because about them hangs, as its atmosphere about a planet, the thought-environment of the child, from which he derives those enduring ideas which express themselves as a life-long ‘appetency’ towards things sordid or things lovely, things earthly or divine” (Vol. 2, pp. 36, 37).

*4. The atmosphere of our homes is formed out of the ideas that rule our lives as parents.*

“Education is an atmosphere—that is, the child breathes the atmosphere emanating from his parents; that of the ideas which rule their own lives” (Vol. 2, p. 247).

*5. Atmosphere is only part, not all, of a child’s education. We must also give the discipline of good habits and the living ideas of a generous curriculum.*

“We sometimes err, I think, in taking a part for the whole, and a part of a part for the whole of that part. Of the three clauses of our definition, that which declares that ‘education is an atmosphere’ pleases us most, perhaps, because it is the most inviting to the *laissez aller* principle of human nature. By the way, we lose something by substituting ‘environment’ (that blessed word, Mesopotamia!) for atmosphere. The latter word is symbolic, it is true, but a symbol means more to us all than the name of the thing signified. We think of fresh air, pure, bracing, tonic,—of the definite act of breathing which must be fully accomplished; and we are incited to do more and mean more in the matter of our children’s surroundings if we regard the whole as an atmosphere, than if we accept the more literal ‘environment.’

“But, supposing that ‘Education is an atmosphere’ brings a fresh and vigorous thought to our minds, suppose that it means to us, for our children, sunshine and green fields, pleasant rooms and good pictures, schools where learning is taken in by the gentle act of inspiration, followed by the expiration of all that which is not wanted, where charming teachers compose the children by a half-mesmeric effluence which inclines them to do as others do, be as others are,—suppose that all this is

included in our notion of ‘Education is an atmosphere,’ may we not sit at our ease and believe that all is well, and that the whole of education has been accomplished? No; because though we cannot live *without* air, neither can we live *upon* air, and children brought up upon ‘environment’ soon begin to show signs of inanition; they have little or no healthy curiosity, power of attention, or of effort; what is worse, they lose spontaneity and initiative; they expect life to drop into them like drops into a rain-tub, without effort or intention on their part.

“This notion, that education is included in environment, or, at the best, in atmosphere, has held the ground for a generation or two, and it seems to me that it has left its mark upon our public and our private lives. We are more ready to be done unto than to do; we do not care for the labour of ordering our own lives in this direction or in that; they must be conducted for us; a press of engagements must compel us into what next, and what next after. We crave for spectacular entertainment, whether in the way of pageants in the streets, or spectacles on the boards. Even Shakespeare has come to be so much the occasion for gorgeous spectacles that what the poet says is of little moment compared with the show a play affords. There is nothing intentionally vicious in all this; it is simply our effort to escape from the *ennui* that results from a one-sided view of education,—that education is an atmosphere *only*” (Vol. 3, pp. 148–150).

***6. The atmosphere of the home should encourage freedom under authority and obedience.***

“It is not an environment that these want, a set of artificial relations carefully constructed, but an *atmosphere* which nobody has been at pains to constitute. It is there, about the child, his natural element, precisely as the atmosphere of the earth is about us. It is thrown off, as it were, from persons and things, stirred by events, sweetened by love, ventilated, kept in motion, by the regulated action of common sense. We all know the natural conditions under which a child should live; how he shares household ways with his mother, romps with his father, is teased by his brothers and petted by his sisters; is taught by his tumbles; learns self-denial by the baby’s needs, the delightfulness of furniture by playing at battle and siege with sofa and table; learns veneration for the old by the visits of his great-grandmother; how to live with his equals by the chums he gathers round him; learns intimacy with animals

from his dog and cat; delight in the fields where the buttercups grow and greater delight in the blackberry hedges. And, what tempered 'fusion of classes' is so effective as a child's intimacy with his betters, and also with cook and housemaid, blacksmith and joiner, with everybody who comes in his way? Children have a genius for this sort of general intimacy, a valuable part of their education; care and guidance are needed, of course, lest admiring friends should make fools of them, but no compounded 'environment' could make up for this fresh air, this wholesome wind blowing now from one point, now from another.

"We certainly may use atmosphere as an instrument of education, but there are prohibitions, for ourselves rather than for children. Perhaps the chief of these is, that no artificial element be introduced, no sprinkling with rose-water, softening with cushions. Children must face life as it is; if their parents are anxious and perturbed children feel it in the air. "Mummie, Mummie, you aren't going to cry this time, are you?" and a child's hug tries to take away the trouble. By these things children live and we may not keep them in glass cases; if we do, they develop in succulence and softness and will not become plants of renown. But due relations must be maintained; the parents are in authority, the children in obedience; and again, the strong may not lay their burdens on the weak; nor must we expect from children that effort of decision, the most fatiguing in our lives, of which the young should generally be relieved" (Vol. 6, pp. 96, 97).

## *Chapter 3*

### *What Everybody Ought to Know about Choosing Curriculum and Schedules*

What does your home express about yourself? Obviously, none of us has a perfect home that is exactly what we wish it would be. But if a new acquaintance walked through the front door, what could she learn about you from looking at your home?

Our homes reflect our priorities, our personalities, our preferences—the ideas that rule our lives. And people’s thoughts are affected by spending time in our homes.

It’s the same with our children. When Charlotte Mason said, “Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life,” the word “atmosphere” refers to the ideas that rule your life as a parent. Charlotte reminded us that “the child breathes the atmosphere emanating from his parents; that of the ideas which rule their own lives” (Vol. 2, p. 247).

Let’s take it one step further. If our homes reflect the ideas that rule our lives, then our homeschooling choices do too. For example, what does your choice of curriculum say about what is important to you? What might your daily schedule express about your personal priorities? Yes, we all have room to improve, but now might be a good time to take a long, hard look at how our personal ideas should affect our choices in both curriculum and schedules. Here are a few tips and thoughts.

#### *Curriculum*

When selecting books for your child, look for ones that will reinforce your priorities. Many people recommend a myriad of books for various reasons, but your choices should ultimately reflect the ideas that rule your life. For example, I personally

don't want my children soaking up details about false gods (mythology) until they have a firm footing in Scripture and can discern what they are reading from a Biblical point of view. Therefore, I bypass the classic mythology books written for young children. That's just a choice based on an idea that rules my life. Other parents will have other ideas that are important to them. And the beauty of it is that we will probably all be able to find good living books that fit our personal criteria!

So when you are perusing those catalogs or wandering through those vendor halls, be careful not to base your curriculum decisions solely on colorful covers or others' recommendations. Make sure you select books that promote the ideas that rule your life.

One word of caution from Charlotte: When selecting books to help build character, look for ones that present good morals, but avoid those that present them in a goody-goody sugar-coated way. "It is inadvisable to put twaddling 'goody-goody' story-books into the hands of the young people: a revulsion of taste will come, and then, the weakness of this sort of literature will be laid to the charge of religion" (Vol. 5, pp. 211, 212).

## *Schedules*

As you determine your schedule, be courageous enough to make it reflect the ideas that rule your life—or maybe, the ideas that you want to have rule your life. Charlotte encouraged us, "Do not let the endless succession of small things crowd great ideals out of sight and out of mind" (*The Story of Charlotte Mason*, p. 160). That's a great quote to stick on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror . . . or maybe it should go on your calendar!

It is never too late to make a change. Yes, you *can* say No to one or more outside activities that are causing such stress on you. There is a huge difference between a life ruled by ideas and a life ruled by crises. I urge you to carefully consider all those sports, field trips, co-op groups, and mommy commitments that you feel are expected of you. Reclaim your home's atmosphere and embrace those ideas that you value most.

And along those lines, may I also encourage you to build some margin into your schedule? You know what a margin is: that space around the text on a book's page. Think how overwhelming it would be to try to read a page that had words from edge

to edge, from top to bottom, with no margin! Well, some of our lives have become like that crowded page. We have left no room in our schedules for spontaneous opportunities to teach, unexpected moments to enjoy beauty, or immediate privileges to serve others. So if you want a home atmosphere that reflects those ideas, keep “margin” in mind as you create your schedule.

Schedules and curriculum—two important facets that make up the atmosphere in which our children grow and learn.

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*“Do not let the endless succession of small things crowd great ideals out of sight and out of mind” (The Story of Charlotte Mason, p. 160).*

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## *Chapter 4*

### *Are You a Thermostat or a Thermometer?*

My husband John thinks in word pictures, and several years ago he described a word picture that has stuck in my mind ever since. He explained that some people are like thermostats and some are like thermometers. A thermostat regulates the temperature and atmosphere of the home. It is set to a constant temperature, and if the atmosphere around it heats up, it kicks in and gets that temperature back to normal. On the flip side, a thermometer reacts to the temperature and atmosphere around it. If the air around it heats up, it heats up too. In other words, a thermometer is controlled by its atmosphere; a thermostat controls its atmosphere. There's a big difference.

Now bring that word picture into our discussion of Education is an Atmosphere. Mama is often the one who sets the atmosphere of the home because she is usually the one with the children all day every day. You've heard the saying, "If Mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!" And I'm sure you've seen the difference in your children when you're "on top of your game" or when you're too tired to even try. We've all been there and done that.

We want to stay on top of our game; we want to be thermostats! But we often find ourselves drained, exhausted, and just plain ol' weary.

#### *Go Out to Play!*

Charlotte recognized that mothering is a demanding job—and especially when you add schooling into the mix. She knew the importance of being a thermostat (though she used the phrase "always serene," probably because she hadn't heard my



husband's word picture). But more than that, she gave some suggestions for helping us moms keep that emotional margin that is so essential to creating the atmosphere you want your children to absorb.

“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” (Vol. 3, pp. 33, 34).

Four great suggestions for mothers who want to refresh their Atmosphere mind-set!

### *More Ideas*

Here are a few more ideas for “resetting our thermostats”:

- Listen to some praise music.
- Simplify your plans for the next meal you have to make today. Make it easy!
- Say No to a stress-building, time-eating event that is stealing your joy. (And feel your shoulders relax.)
- Do a 15-minute cleaning project. (A serene setting helps create a serene atmosphere.)
- Take a 20-minute nap.
- Sit down for a cup of tea (or a Coke!).
- Take a 15-minute walk.

- Karen Andreola mentioned more ideas in an article she wrote titled, “Mother Culture and You” at <http://www.home-school.com/Articles/phs30-karenandreola.html>

Education is an Atmosphere. The ideas that rule your life make up a large part of your child’s learning and shaping as he or she grows up in your home.

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*“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!” (Vol. 3, p. 33).*

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## Chapter 5

### *Education Is a Discipline*

*Jan sighed. “We have to wait on my daughter for everything. She takes twice as long as the rest of us to get dressed every morning. If we have an appointment to get to, I have to allow an extra half hour for her to get to the van. And don’t even get me started on schoolwork! An assignment that should take her fifteen minutes will stretch into at least an hour. I’m at my wit’s end!”*

Charlotte’s counsel to Jan would be a gentle reminder that “Education is a discipline.” By “discipline” Charlotte meant the importance of cultivating good habits in our children—habits that they would then continue into their adult lives. In fact, she likened these good habits to railroad tracks that parents can lay down in their children’s lives, allowing the child to run on them smoothly into the future with little thought or effort.

When we think of good habits, we usually think of training our children to make their beds and brush their teeth. But Charlotte maintained that the same principle we use to train a child in one of those habits could be applied to training a child to give full attention, to tell the truth, or to look for ways to be helpful. Habits don’t have to be restricted to chores. Habits can be powerful tools in shaping your child’s character.

Somehow we don’t equate “character” with “habit.” But the saying is true, “Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character.” Charlotte challenged parents to apply that principle to building moral habits (like self-control, good use of time, and personal initiative), mental habits (like logical thinking, memorizing, and observing), physical habits (like fortitude and self-restraint

in indulgences), and even religious habits (like regular devotions, thanksgiving, and thought of God) in their children's lives.

Jan's trouble is that her daughter has developed the bad habit of dawdling. Just think how your home life would be different if your children developed the good habit of giving full attention the first time you said something or the habit of obeying the first time you told them to do something. Yes, it is possible! But it takes discipline on our part.

### *Charlotte's Thoughts on Education Is a Discipline*

#### *1. We should put intentional thought and effort into forming habits.*

"By Education is a discipline, is meant the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structure to habitual lines of thought—*i.e.* to our habits" (Vol. 1, Preface).

#### *2. It's not always easy to administer consequences, but our children's futures depend on our faithfulness and efforts to do so.*

"It is evident that to administer rewards and punishments on this principle [natural consequences] requires patient consideration and steady determination on the mother's part. She must consider with herself what fault of disposition the child's misbehaviour springs from; she must aim her punishment at that fault, and must brace herself to see her child suffer present loss for his lasting gain. Indeed, exceedingly little actual punishment is necessary where children are brought up with care. But this happens continually—the child who has done well gains some natural reward (like that ten minutes in the garden), which the child forfeits who has done less well; and the mother must brace herself and her child to bear this loss; if she equalise the two children she commits a serious wrong, not against the child who has done well, but against the defaulter, whom she deliberately encourages to repeat his shortcoming. In placing her child under the discipline of consequences, the mother must use much tact and discretion. In many cases, the *natural consequence* of the child's fault is precisely that which it is her business to avert, while, at the same time, she looks about for some consequence related to the fault which shall have an *educative* bearing on the child: for instance, if a boy neglects his studies, the *natural*

consequence is that he remains ignorant; but to allow him to do so would be criminal neglect on the part of the parent” (Vol. 1, pp. 148, 149).

*3. Habits can become stronger than natural inclinations.*

“ ‘It’s human nature,’ we say, when stormy Harry snatches his drum from Jack; when baby Marjorie, who is not two, screams for Susie’s doll. So it is, and for that very reason it must be dealt with early. Even Marjorie must be taught better. ‘I always finish teaching my children obedience before they are one year old,’ said a wise mother; and any who know the nature of children, and the possibilities open to the educator, will say, Why not? Obedience in the first year, and all the virtues of the good life as the years go on; every year with its own definite work to show in the training of character. Is Edward a selfish child when his fifth birthday comes? The fact is noted in his parents’ year-book, with the resolve that by his sixth birthday he shall, please God, be a generous child. . . . The parent who believes that the possibilities of virtuous training are unlimited will set to work with cheerful confidence, will forego the twaddle about ‘Nature,’ whether as lovely in itself or as an irresistible force, and will perceive that the first function of the parent is that function of *discipline*” (Vol. 2, pp. 64, 65).

*4. Education should deal with character issues, not just acquiring a certain amount of knowledge.*

“The fact is, many of us do not believe in education, except as it means the acquirement of a certain amount of knowledge; but education which shall deal curatively and methodically with every flaw in character does not enter into our scheme of things possible. No less than this is what we mean when we say, Education is a Discipline” (Vol. 2, p. 66).

*5. Incessant watchfulness and work are required for forming and preserving habits.*

“Not mere spurts of occasional punishment, but the incessant watchfulness and endeavour which go to the forming and preserving of the habits of the good life, is what we mean by discipline; and, from this point of view, never were there such disciplinarians as the parents who labour on the lines we would indicate. Every habit of courtesy, consideration, order, neatness, punctuality, truthfulness, is itself a

schoolmaster, and orders life with the most unfailing diligence” (Vol. 2, p. 173).

*6. Cultivating good habits makes up one-third of our children’s education.*

“The discipline of habit is at least a third part of the great whole which we call education” (Vol. 3, p. 99).

*7. The effort is in the forming of a habit; once it is formed it is no longer strenuous.*

“It is unnecessary to enumerate those habits which we should aim at forming, for everyone knows more about these than anyone practises. We admire the easy carriage of the soldier but shrink from the discipline which is able to produce it. We admire the lady who can sit upright through a long dinner, who in her old age prefers a straight chair because she has arrived at due muscular balance and has done so by a course of discipline. There is no other way of forming any good habit, though the discipline is usually that of the internal government which the person exercises upon himself; but a certain strenuousness in the formation of good habits is necessary because every such habit is the result of conflict” (Vol. 6, pp. 101, 102).

## Chapter 6

### *Five Ways to Cultivate Good Habits*

It's pretty safe to say that we all want our children (and ourselves) to develop good habits. The hard part is knowing how to go about it. Here are five tips from Charlotte Mason's writings, along with some practical Q&A's, that will help you get started.

#### *1. Pick One Habit*

Charlotte Mason encouraged us moms to concentrate on forming one habit at a time, keeping watch over those habits already formed. Soon it will become your habit to cultivate good habits in your children.

**Q:** I don't know where to start. I see so many habits that my children need to develop that my mind is reeling. Where do I begin?

**A:** Read through the list of habits that Charlotte mentioned (see page 32 in this book), and ask the Lord to "hit you in the face" with the one that you need to concentrate on first. It's easy to think that there's no way we can cultivate all those habits, but consider this: if you spend six to eight weeks (2 months) instilling a habit, you can accomplish about six each year. If you instill six each year, you will have covered Charlotte's entire list in about ten years—and chances are, your child will be living in your home for longer than just ten years. So don't get stressed out, just choose one and start in. Each habit will benefit your child.

#### *2. Be Vigilant and Consistent*

Be diligent to deal with offenses immediately. The more times a child repeats an

action or progression of thought, the more it will become ingrained as a habit. We must seek to stop our children's minds from running in those same old paths and lay down the new path of the good habit.

**Q:** My biggest problem is getting my child to obey the first time I tell him to do something. How do you do that?

**A:** The main principle is to apply the consequence sooner. Let me explain what I mean. Most children are trained to obey, but the key is *when* they obey—when mother's voice reaches a certain decibel level, or when mother counts to three, or when mother's face turns red. You get the idea. They know that when that point is reached, a consequence will follow if they do not obey. So the key is to move the consequence up and apply it matter-of-factly after you have told the child the first time to do something. Consistency is the key to both the child's self-discipline and your own. If the child is old enough to understand what is happening, you might want to sit down with him during a neutral time and explain that things are changing because you want him to develop this important habit of doing something the first time he is told to do it. Briefly explain how this habit will be crucial when he is an adult—whether he is working for someone else or servicing his own customers. Then follow through with making sure you have his attention, stating your command once (you might even have him narrate what he is to do), and applying the consequences right away if he does not obey immediately.

### *3. Share Living Examples*

Motivate your child with living examples of people who have displayed the good habit you're trying to instill. For example, read the story of George Washington and the cherry tree if you want to motivate your child toward the habit of truthfulness. The Bible is full of great examples of habits like obedience, respecting others, prayer, and meditating on God's Word.

Isn't it motivating to you as a mom when you can actually watch another mom whom you admire "in action"? Yes, lists of pointers are helpful, but there is nothing that compares to a living example. You may not be able to point your child toward a living person who is displaying the character quality you are trying to instill in that child, but you can give him a living story that brings the person and the character quality to life.



#### ***4. Apply Appropriate Consequences***

Use natural consequences as much as possible to reinforce the results of the child's choices. For example, if the child is trying to learn the habit of full attention to his lessons, set a time limit in which he must finish his lesson correctly. If he finishes early, let him have those extra minutes to do whatever he would like before the next lesson. If you think about it, natural consequences are a reflection of real life. If we, moms, have set aside half a day to clean house and we work hard and get it done an hour early, we are rewarded with an hour to do as we please.

**Q:** Could you give some examples of natural consequences? I don't want to be spanking all the time.

**A:** Consequences can take many forms, and motivation is the key. It's not really an effective consequence if it doesn't motivate. Here are just some consequences that come to mind. Ultimately, you need to find what works for your particular child, but I hope these will at least give you a starting point as you think through and pray through the process. Keep in mind that you need to have many tools (consequence options) in your discipline-development toolbox. If you use only one, it can lose its effectiveness.

- Physical stimulus—Spanking is one option, but doesn't have to be the only one. With young children, I often physically “help” them to obey by moving their arms or legs or whatever is involved in what I expect them to do. For example, if I'm trying to get a toddler to hand me a toy as we're cleaning up, if she doesn't respond after my first directive, I might go to her and firmly but gently move her arm and hand to the toy in question, help her grasp it and take it over to where it belongs. Obviously, this cannot be done with older and larger children, but it works well as an option for little ones. They seem to develop a type of “muscle memory” that tells them to move when directed to with this option. Again, this is not effective if used exclusively, but can be helpful as an option sometimes.

- Removing obstacles — If a child does not obey after my first direction, I often look to see what obstacle is hindering their obedience. Are they playing with a toy? If so, I calmly and firmly take that toy away with a brief, “I will hold this until you have obeyed me” and a meaningful look. If being alone in her room is an obstacle because she sits on the floor and daydreams instead of putting on her shoes, I might go with her to get her shoes and bring them (holding her hand, if necessary, to keep her on task) back to where I am working so she will feel my expectant eye on her as she puts on her shoes. In

that case, I am removing her from the solitude that prompts her daydreaming. If a child throws a toy, I take it away and put it up immediately; and he catches on very quickly. If two children are arguing over a toy, I take it with the brief explanation, “If this toy is causing you to be unkind to each other, I’ll just put it away.” These are not threats, they are matter-of-fact consequences that are only effective when we follow through immediately every time. (Yes, developing discipline in our children requires huge amounts of discipline in ourselves!)

- Adding responsibilities — Another type of consequence is adding responsibilities. This works more for the older children, but might be effective with younger children in certain situations. If a child does not give full attention to her lesson and doesn’t have it done in the allotted time, she has a second session of that lesson added to her schedule later in the day. If a child tries an experiment, against your better judgment but with your permission to try, and it doesn’t turn out as he had hoped, he has the added responsibility of cleaning up the mess. If a child does not put her clothes in the hamper and, therefore, they don’t get included in the laundry, she has the added responsibility to do her own laundry the next day.

- Removing privileges — This type of consequence is most effective if the privilege is somehow related to the action, but it doesn’t have to be. For example, if the child is allotted fifteen minutes to play a computer game but abuses the privilege and plays longer, she doesn’t get to play on the computer for a set amount of days (the amount can be dependent on whether this is her first “offense” or a repeating occurrence). If the child is continually tipping his chair back on two legs, he has to stand for that meal or that lesson (or however long you need to make the time); he loses the privilege of using that chair. Whatever the child is abusing, he loses.

Natural consequences can be very effective. The only problem is that it is often harder to think of an appropriate natural consequence, so many of us take the easy way out and resort to that old stand-by: nagging. Which brings us to #5 . . .

### *5. Encourage, Don’t Nag*

Seek to motivate your child with expectant encouragement rather than nagging. Hebrews 10:24 and 1 Thessalonians 5:11 remind us to consider how we can encourage each other to do good and to build each other up. None of us enjoy being nagged, and we soon learn to ignore it or tune it out. Encouragement will go a long way toward keeping your relationship with your child intact while cultivating good habits.

**Q:** What do you mean by “expectant encouragement”? What does it look like?

**A:** I think the main difference is tone of voice and facial expression. A phrase like, “Do you think you can get this done in five minutes?” could be delivered in a way that attacks the other person or in a way that says, “I want to help you succeed. Let’s work together on this habit.” The attitude of positive expectancy can also be communicated well if we take the time to walk with our child through the action, rather than just sending him to do it, until he has developed the habit thoroughly.

Charlotte gave this practical example in Volume 1, page 120: “The child goes to dress for a walk; she dreams over the lacing of her boots—the tag in her fingers poised in mid air—but her conscience is awake; she is constrained to look up, and her mother’s eye is upon her, hopeful and expectant. She answers to the rein and goes on; midway, in the lacing of the second boot, there is another pause, shorter this time; again she looks up, and again she goes on. The pauses become fewer day by day, the efforts steadier, the immature young will is being strengthened, the habit of prompt action acquired. After that first talk, the mother would do well to refrain from one more word on the subject; the eye (expectant, not reproachful), and, where the child is far gone in a dream, the lightest possible touch, are the only effectual instruments. By-and-by, ‘Do you think you can get ready in five minutes to-day without me?’ ‘Oh yes, mother.’ ‘Do not say “yes” unless you are quite sure.’ ‘I will try.’ And she tries, and succeeds.”

Now, obviously, a mother can stand there and watch her child tie her shoes with a stern look and a tiresome sigh, so just the action of being there with the child isn’t a magic formula. The difference is all in our attitude. I think this point especially ties in with the chapter “Are You a Thermostat or Thermometer?”

So there you have five ways to cultivate good habits in your child. Are you beginning to get a glimpse into why this part of education is called “discipline”? It takes discipline to form good habits!

## *Charlotte Mason Habits*

### *Decency and Propriety Habits*

Cleanliness

Courtesy

Kindness

Manners

Modesty and Purity

Neatness

Order

Regularity

*(Mentioned only)*

Candor

Courage

Diligence

Fortitude

Generosity

Gentleness

Meekness

Patience

Respect

Temperance

Thrift

### *Mental Habits*

Attention

Imagining

Meditation

Memorizing

Mental Effort

Observation

Perfect Execution

Reading for Instruction

Remembering

Thinking

*(Mentioned only)*

Accuracy

Concentration

Reflection

Thoroughness

### *Moral Habits*

Integrity

Priorities

Finishing

Use of Time

Borrowed Property

Obedience

Personal Initiative

Reverence

Self-Control

Sweet, Even Temper

Truthfulness

Usefulness

### *Physical Habits*

Alertness to Seize

Opportunities

Fortitude

Health

Managing One's Own Body

Music

Outdoor Life

Quick Perception of Senses

Self-Control in Emergencies

Self-Discipline in Habits

Self-Restraint in Indulgences

Training the Ear and Voice

### *Religious Habits*

Regularity in Devotions

Prayer

Reading the Bible

Praise

Reverent Attitude

Sunday-Keeping

Thanksgiving

Thought of God

Note: You can find a collection of Charlotte's specific tips for each habit in the book *Laying Down the Rails*, available from Simply Charlotte Mason.

## *Chapter 7*

### *Discipline Brings Freedom*

To most of us, the idea of self-discipline comes with a mental picture of a ball and chain. We think of discipline as a taskmaster, forcing us to do what we don't really want to do. Today let's change that mental image. Let's consider how discipline brings freedom!

Charlotte Mason's three-pronged approach to education includes discipline: Education is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life. You see, Charlotte understood the freedom that comes from applying discipline in order to form good habits. For example, think about the freedom that would come if your child developed the habit of obeying the first time you told him to do something. And don't just think about the freedom it would bring to you; consider how your child would be free from a nagging parent, mental unrest because he has unfinished business, and overall conflict that disobedience always brings in the home. Talk about walking in freedom!

#### *Some Examples of Freedom*

Here are some more examples of how discipline brings freedom in various areas of life:

**Discipline:** Plug in your cell phone every night to charge it.

**Freedom:** You don't have to worry about whether your battery will run out in the middle of a call. Your family members don't have to wonder whether they will be able to reach you.

**Discipline:** Put things away as you finish using them.

**Freedom:** You don't waste time and energy searching for the items you need. The discipline of taking two minutes to tidy up each time saves you from spending half a day (or more) sorting through the numerous piles that have accumulated.

**Discipline:** Give every reading assignment your full attention.

**Freedom:** You are prepared for the narration or exam questions and don't have to re-read the whole thing to learn what you could have learned the first time through.

### *A Process*

Discipline brings freedom! Now, keep in mind that self-discipline is the ultimate goal. It's not true freedom if you are always depending on someone else to prod and push you. That's why discipline is such an important part of our children's educational process. Notice that word "process." We guide them with discipline from without until they can make the transition to discipline themselves from within. Charlotte said, "This subject of training in becoming habits is so well understood amongst us that I need only add that such habits are not fully formed so long as supervision is necessary. At first, a child wants the support of constant supervision, but, by degrees, he is left to do the thing he ought of his own accord" (Vol. 3, p. 108).

So where are you in that process? Are you in the constant-supervision stage, just starting to lay down a new "habit rail" in your child's life? Are you somewhere in the transition-by-degrees stage, making small, incremental adjustments that are encouraging your child toward self-discipline and success in a habit? Or are you seeing the fruit of your child's exercising self-discipline in a particular habit and the freedom that it is bringing?

Wherever you are in the process, don't forget the wonderful result that you and your child are working toward. When you're tempted to focus on the effort and exertion of helping your child develop self-discipline in a particular habit, take some time to meditate on the freedom that will come because of your consistent efforts.

## Chapter 8

### *Education Is a Life*

*“My children are bored stiff with this curriculum. And the problem is that it’s not the first time. We’ve tried three different publishers’ materials,” confessed Colleen. “Nothing seems to work.”*

Colleen would benefit by remembering Charlotte’s phrase, “Education is a life.” This facet is probably the most familiar of Charlotte’s ideas. She wanted education to be alive to the children, to give their minds the nourishment of living ideas instead of dry facts.

Most of us were probably raised with textbooks, workbooks, and memorize-the-facts methods that earned us approval if we could regurgitate the facts on the true and false, fill in the blank, and multiple choice tests. Yet how many of those facts do we remember now? How many of those classes lit a fire within us, causing us to think deeply on an idea and absorb it as a part of our very lives?

I remember only one class that intrigued me and started me on a lifelong passion. It was a Bible class on the book of Joshua. The reason I remember it so clearly (I can still see my teacher leaning on a stool with her hands in the air and her eyes sparkling.) is because my teacher simply told us the stories in the best living book of all time—the Bible. She made Joshua come alive to me and ignited a passion for Bible study within my heart. That was in fourth grade.

It’s amazing how living ideas will grip us and not let go. Charlotte said, “ We all know how an idea *‘strikes,’ ‘seizes,’ ‘catches hold of,’ ‘impresses’* us and at last, if it be big enough, *‘possesses’* us; . . . No phrase is more common and more promising than,

‘I have an idea’; we rise to such an opening as trout to a well-chosen fly. There is but one sphere in which the word idea never occurs, in which the conception of an idea is curiously absent, and that sphere is education! Look at any publisher’s list of school books and you shall find that the books recommended are carefully desiccated, drained of the least suspicion of an idea, reduced to the driest statements of fact” (Vol. 6, p. 105).

Yet living books and methods do exist! It’s just that, with curriculum, we too often settle for what looks easy rather than going on a treasure hunt for what is living. Education is a life teeming with ideas. Let’s spread the feast of living ideas before our children rather than handing them dry factual crumbs.

### *Charlotte’s Thoughts on Education Is a Life*

#### *1. Children should be fed great intellectual and moral ideas through a generous curriculum.*

“In the saying that Education is a life, the need of intellectual and moral as well as of physical sustenance is implied. The mind feeds on ideas, and therefore children should have a generous curriculum” (Vol. 1, Preface).

#### *2. Not all education feeds our children’s inner lives with great ideas.*

“Now that life, which we call education, receives only one kind of sustenance; it grows upon *ideas*. You may go through years of so-called ‘education’ without getting a single vital idea; and that is why many a well-fed body carries about a feeble, starved intelligence” (Vol. 2, p. 33).

#### *3. Only those nourishing ideas become a part of the child; mere knowledge does not.*

“In the early years of the child’s life it makes, perhaps, little apparent difference whether his parents start with the notion that to educate is to fill a receptacle, inscribe a tablet, mould plastic matter, or nourish a life; but in the end we shall find that only those *ideas* which have fed his life are taken into the being of the child; all the rest is thrown away, or worse, is like sawdust in the system, an impediment and an injury to the vital processes” (Vol. 2, p. 38).

“For the mind is capable of dealing with only one kind of food; it lives, grows and



is nourished upon ideas only; mere information is to it as a meal of sawdust to the body” (Vol. 6, p. 105).

*4. Living ideas can make learning a delight to a child and a passion for life.*

“What part do lessons and the general work of the schoolroom play in education thus regarded?

“They should afford opportunity for the discipline of many good habits, and should convey to the child such initial ideas of interest in his various studies as to make the pursuit of knowledge on those lines an object in life and a delight to him” (Vol. 2, p. 247).

*5. The books we use for school should contain living ideas, not merely facts.*

“Under the phrase, ‘Education is a life,’ I have tried to show how necessary it is to sustain the intellectual life upon ideas, and, as a corollary, that a school-book should be a medium for ideas and not merely a receptacle for facts” (Vol. 3, p. 216).

*6. Living ideas can come through many means: the spoken word, books, Scripture, music.*

“Education is a life. That life is sustained on ideas. Ideas are of spiritual origin, and God has made us so that we get them chiefly as we convey them to one another, whether by word of mouth, written page, Scripture word, musical symphony; but we must sustain a child’s inner life with ideas as we sustain his body with food” (Vol. 6, p. 109).

## Chapter 9

### *Charlotte Mason's Methods*

One way Charlotte Mason made education “living” was by using living books. A living book is a book written by one author with a passion for the subject and written in narrative or story form. These books draw the reader into the storyline and make the events come alive. (You will find some recommended resources for living books on page 42.)

But an education based on living ideas is more than just living books. Charlotte wanted to introduce the children to the great ideas of men and women in the past, and those ideas can also be communicated through art and music. So Charlotte used picture study and music study as part of her generous curriculum. In fact, all of her methods complement this idea of education's being alive. Take a look at this quick list of her methods and see how they concentrate on communicating great ideas, not just dry facts.

**Living Books:** Reading a book written by one author with a passion for the subject and written in narrative or story form.

**Narration:** Asking the child to tell back in his own words what he just saw, read, or heard.

**Book of Centuries:** Each student adds information, sketches, and reminders into his timeline-in-a-book as he reads about historical events and people.

**Hands-on Math:** An emphasis on understanding the concepts, using manipulatives, before working with the symbols on paper.

**Nature Study:** Spending time outside looking at God’s creation, sketching and describing in a nature notebook any item of interest, then identifying and labeling it with the help of field guides.

**Copywork:** Practicing handwriting by carefully copying passages from living sources, like Scripture, poetry, or living books.

**Dictation:** Learning spelling (and reinforcing punctuation and grammar) by studying a selected sentence or passage from a living book rather than just a list of words.

**Picture Study:** Looking at an artist’s work until you can close your eyes and see it clearly in your mind, then hiding the original work and narrating what it looks like.

**Music Study:** Listening to a composer’s work until you become familiar with his music and style of composition.

Do you see how each of these methods provides the child with a living idea, not just a list of facts to memorize and regurgitate on the next test? Education is a life—a living idea!

The chart on the next page shows which of these methods Charlotte used for each school subject. If you haven’t tried them, do so; I’m sure you will be pleasantly surprised at their efficiency and effectiveness.

But remember, these methods make up only one-third of your child’s education. Education is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life! A well-rounded education includes all three.

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*“By this we mean that parents and teachers should know how to make sensible use of a child’s circumstances (atmosphere), should train him in habits of good living (discipline), and should nourish his mind with ideas, the food of the intellectual life” (Vol. 3, pp. 216, 217).*

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<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Charlotte Mason Methods</b>
<i>Basic Principles for All Subjects</i>	Short lessons; habits of attention and perfect execution; varied order of subjects
History	Living books; narration; Book of Centuries
Geography	Living books; narration; map drill
Bible	Read aloud; narration (discussion for older students); memorize and recite regularly
Math	Manipulatives; a firm understanding of why
Science	Nature study and notebook; living books; narration
Foreign Languages	Hear and speak, then read and write
Writing	Copywork for handwriting; oral and written narration for composition
Spelling	Prepared dictation
Grammar	Not formally studied until older than ten
Art	Picture study for art appreciation; handicrafts; nature notebooks for drawing and painting
Music	Music study for music appreciation; any instrumental instruction; singing
Literature	Living books; narration
Poetry	Read aloud and enjoy frequently; memorize and recite occasionally (include Shakespeare)

### ***Recommended Resources for Living Books***

- *All Through the Ages* by Christine Miller.  
Available through [www.NothingNewPress.com](http://www.NothingNewPress.com)
- Beautiful Feet Books at [www.bfbooks.com](http://www.bfbooks.com)
- CM Bookfinder at [www.SimpleCharlotteMason.com](http://www.SimpleCharlotteMason.com)
- Greenleaf Press at [www.GreenleafPress.com](http://www.GreenleafPress.com)
- Lifetime Books and Gifts at [www.LifetimeBooksandGifts.com](http://www.LifetimeBooksandGifts.com)
- *A Literary Education* by Catherine Levison.  
Available through [www.CharlotteMasonEducation.com](http://www.CharlotteMasonEducation.com)
- Penny Gardner's book lists at [www.PennyGardner.com](http://www.PennyGardner.com)

### ***Recommended Books and Web Sites to Learn More about Charlotte Mason's Approach***

- *A Charlotte Mason Companion* by Karen Andreola  
of [www.HomeschoolHighlights.com](http://www.HomeschoolHighlights.com)
- *A Charlotte Mason Education* and *More Charlotte Mason Education*  
by Catherine Levison of [www.CharlotteMasonEducation.com](http://www.CharlotteMasonEducation.com)
- *Charlotte Mason Study Guide* by Penny Gardner of [www.PennyGardner.com](http://www.PennyGardner.com)
- *Laying Down the Rails: A Charlotte Mason Habits Handbook* by Sonya Shafer  
of [www.SimpleCharlotteMason.com](http://www.SimpleCharlotteMason.com)
- The Original Home Schooling Series by Charlotte Mason in six volumes:  
*Home Education, Parents and Children, School Education, Ourselves, Formation of Character, A Philosophy of Education*

*Education is an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life*

*Get more great resources  
for your home school at  
[www.SimplyCharlotteMason.com](http://www.SimplyCharlotteMason.com).*

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