

Simply Charlotte Mason presents

Smooth and Easy Days

with Charlotte Mason

by Sonya Shafer

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Smooth and Easy Days with Charlotte Mason
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Vol. 1: Home Education

Vol. 2: Parents and Children

Vol. 3: School Education

Vol. 4: Ourselves

Vol. 5: Formation of Character

Vol. 6: A Philosophy of Education

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Chapter 1

Smooth and Easy Days

The past couple of weeks we've been doing a little deep cleaning around our house. Well, okay, not a little—a lot. At least it seems like a lot. Cleaning can be hard work! By the time we have the furniture moved, the closet emptied, the light fixtures disassembled, and the curtain rods dismantled, I'm tired. And only one thing keeps me going: that picture in my mind of how nice the room will look when we're done.

We moms will work hard if we know that the goal is worth it. And what goal is more worthwhile than smooth and easy days? Isn't that what we all want?

Charlotte Mason held that cultivating good habits in our children will bring those smooth and easy days. She said, "We are not unwilling to make efforts in the beginning with the assurance that by-and-by things will go smoothly; and this is just what habit is, in an extraordinary degree, pledged to effect. The mother who

takes pains to endow her children with good habits secures for herself smooth and easy days; while she who lets their habits take care of themselves has a weary life of endless friction with the children” (Vol. 1, p. 136).

Notice two important points in her statement. First, we must “take pains.” This habit-forming is going to require some work. But smooth and easy days are worth a little effort. Smooth and easy days are worth a *lot* of effort!

Second, the habits that we are cultivating within our children are an endowment—an investment that will bring them future benefit. Smooth and easy days now are a great goal, but this project is even bigger than that. Good habits instilled now will equip our children well for their futures.

The mother who takes pains to endow her children with good habits secures for herself smooth and easy days.

Think of all the habits you wish you already had ingrained in your life right now. How would they make your life easier as an adult? You have the opportunity to endow and equip your child with those habits now, and they will be in place to serve him as he grows.

That’s a goal worth hanging on the galleries of our minds. Can you picture the rewarding scenes? Then let’s start working toward those smooth and easy days.

Chapter 2

Habits Produce Character

When my children were little, I had a short list of tasks that I wanted them to perform every morning: brush teeth, comb hair, make the bed. Each day after breakfast we would go through the same routine until, little by little, I was able to wean away my presence and know that the children were still going to perform those tasks in the same thorough manner as when I was supervising.

What was I trying to do? I was trying to instill those tasks as habits. I figured that if the children would do those three tasks habitually, it would make life easier for me now and give them a good foundation for their futures.

But when I read Charlotte's thoughts on habits, it was as though she was saying, "Why stop there?" According to Charlotte, I could cultivate traits of *character* by making *them* habits as well—traits like obedience, attention, and truthfulness.

Think about it: character is a result of habit. If a person is known for being truthful—having a truthful character—it’s because he is habitually truthful, not truthful only once in a while or only when he feels like it.

“As has been well said,
‘Sow an act, reap a habit;
sow a habit, reap a character;
sow a character, reap a destiny’ ” (Vol. 2, p. 124).

So instead of being satisfied with brushed teeth, I could cultivate the character trait of cleanliness. Instead of just teaching them to make the bed, I could instill the character trait of neatness. Another way of putting it is “habits produce character.”

“The habits of the child produce the character of the man” (Vol. 1, p. 118).

You may think, “That’s all well and good if you’re starting with a blank canvas, but my child has inherited a quick temper from his grandfather. His character is already skewed by his nature.”

Charlotte taught that habit trumps nature. In fact, she said, “Strong as nature is, habit is not only as strong, but *tenfold* as strong” (Vol. 1, p. 105). Your child

*The habits of the
child produce the
character of the
man.*

can overcome his natural tendencies by intentionally instilling good habits in his life. (And so can you.)

So look through the habits listed in the back of this book (p. 43) and start thinking in terms of character. “Every day, every hour, the parents are either passively or actively forming those

habits in their children upon which, more than upon anything else, future character and conduct depend” (Vol. 1, p. 118).

All those little tasks are building toward your child’s character. Quite the motivating thought for tomorrow’s after-breakfast routine.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Every day, every hour, the parents are either passively or actively forming those habits in their children upon which, more than upon anything else, future character and conduct depend” (Vol. 1, p. 118).



“Educate the child in right habits and the man’s life will run in them, without the constant wear and tear of the moral effort of decision. Once, twice, three times in a day, he will still, no doubt, have to choose between the highest and the less high, the best and the less good course. But all the minor moralities of life may be made habitual to him. He has been brought up to be courteous, prompt, punctual, neat, considerate; and he practises these virtues without conscious effort” (Vol. 2, p. 124).



“As has been well said, ‘Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.’ And a great function of the educator is to secure that acts shall be so regularly, purposefully, and methodically sown that the child shall reap the habits of the good life, in thinking and doing, with the minimum of conscious effort” (Vol. 2, p. 124).



“Here, indeed, more than anywhere, ‘Except the Lord build the house, they labour but in vain that build it’; but surely intelligent co-operation in this divine work is our bounden duty and service” (Vol. 2, p. 90).



“The mother devotes herself to the formation of one habit at a time, doing no more than keep watch over those already formed” (Vol. 1, p. 136).

Chapter 3

One At a Time

I love lists. I love the feeling that comes from checking an item off my list. In fact, sometimes if an item isn't on my list, I'll add it just so I can check it off. Sad, I know, but true.

I love my lists; however, sometimes lists can be my undoing. If a list is especially long, I can feel the stress level rising. I remember one time I even threw away a list because it just looked too intimidating. I couldn't take the pressure of it staring at me from my desktop.

Habits can be like that. We moms have such grand ideas for developing habits in our children. But when we look at Charlotte's comprehensive list (p. 43) we feel completely overwhelmed. It just looks too intimidating, staring at us from that page.

Before your stress level rises, learn this key point in habit training: one at a time. Charlotte instructed us, "The mother devotes herself to the formation of one habit at a time, doing no more than keep watch over those already formed" (Vol. 1, p. 136).

That's it. One at a time.

Choose one habit and focus on it for six to eight weeks. Then just keep an eye on it while you select another habit to focus on. Don't try to focus on all sixty habits at once. You'll drive yourself and your child crazy!

One at a time.

Does that mean you should ignore bad behavior because it's outside the parameters of the habit you're working on? No, deal with life as it happens. But put your energy into and focus on establishing one good habit during those weeks.

*The mother
devotes herself
to the formation
of one habit at a
time.*

And if you can establish one new habit every couple of months, that's six good habits instilled each year. In ten years you will have worked through all sixty habits on Charlotte's list.

Now, if you just found yourself thinking, "Ten years!" and the thought of sixty habits is still stressing you out, take a tip from Charlotte: "If she be appalled by the thought of overmuch labour, let her limit the number of good habits she will lay herself out to form. The child who starts life with, say, twenty good habits, begins with a certain capital which he will lay out to endless profit as the years go on" (Vol. 1, p. 136).

Even twenty good habits will give your child a profitable endowment for her future.

So don't let the list of habits overwhelm you. Select one and begin working on it.

Soon it will become your habit to work on habits—one at a time.

Chapter 4

Her Own Idea

I can still picture the textured wall, the shiny smooth top of the spinet piano, and the white kitchen timer with its seemingly unmoving dial. I was supposed to be practicing my piano lesson, but I probably spent half of the allotted time listening to that timer's ceaseless ticking. I knew I was supposed to practice every day, but I usually waited until my mother told me to.

Then something happened that changed my whole outlook on practicing: I was asked to accompany the choir. Suddenly I had a reason for practicing and a goal to work toward. Practicing became my idea, a tool I needed to reach my goal. Mom no longer had to remind me; I reminded myself. Mom just gave helpful advice and encouraged me.

Perhaps you've seen that difference of attitude in one of your children. Once a child wants to do something—adopts it as her own—it's amazing how much progress can be made!

This principle is true in habit-training too. You will make much faster and smoother progress if you get your child's will

on your side. Charlotte counseled us to “take a moment of happy confidence between parent and child; introduce, by tale or example, the stimulating idea; get the child’s will with you” (Vol. 2, p. 175).

What might that conversation look like? Here is an example Charlotte gave.

“ ‘Johnny,’ she says, in a bright, friendly voice, ‘I want you to remember something with all your might: never go into or out of a room in which anybody is sitting without shutting the door.’

‘But if I forget, mother?’

‘I will try to remind you.’

‘But perhaps I shall be in a *great* hurry.’

‘You must always make time to do that.’

‘But why, mother?’

‘Because it is not polite to the people in the room to make them uncomfortable.’

‘But if I am going out again that *very* minute?’

‘Still, shut the door, when you come in; you can open it again to go out. Do you think you can remember?’

‘I’ll try, mother.’

‘Very well; I shall watch to see how few “forgets” you make’”

(Vol. 1, pp. 122, 123).

*Get the child’s will
with you.*

Have you picked out one habit to focus on for your child? Think about how you can briefly and encouragingly present the benefits of that habit. Consider what you know of your child and what might help her adopt that habit as her own desire. Then plan for a moment of “happy confidence” between the two of you.

If the new habit becomes your child’s idea—something she wants to do—it will make your job a whole lot easier.

Chapter 5

Take the Same Route

Have you ever driven to the grocery store and, after you pulled into a parking place and shut off the car, you realized that you didn't remember the drive there? It was almost as if you drove on auto-pilot. Whenever that happens to me, my next thought is, "Oh, I hope I didn't run any red lights!"

Taking the same route over and over seems to embed that information into our brains, and soon our brains just run down that path with little or no conscious effort on our part.

That's how we form habits. "The fact is, that the things we do a good many times over leave some sort of impression in the very substance of our brain; and this impression, the more often it is repeated, makes it the easier for us to do the thing the next time" (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208).

Here's a little science lesson for you. You have neurons in your brain. Those neurons talk to each other. And if you have

certain neurons repeatedly talk to each other in a certain sequence, your brain starts to make note of that sequence, or route. The more times you mentally travel down that neuron route, the closer your brain gets to running on auto-pilot.

It's the same for your child. Every time he runs through a specific mental sequence, his brain is one step closer to making that sequence a habit.

Charlotte put it like this: "Every time we do a thing helps to form the habit of doing it; and to do a thing a hundred times without missing a chance, makes the rest easy" (Vol. 4, Book 1, pp. 208, 209).

It stands to reason, then, that if you allow your child's neurons to take a wrong turn, you will not be reinforcing the correct route. To put it in habit-training language, the longer a habit is performed without lapses, the stronger it becomes. So try to correct any "wrong turns" immediately.

Just like driving the same route to the grocery store soon allows you to do it without consciously thinking about it, so repeating the same mental route

and accompanying actions will soon allow your child to do a task (or even adopt an attitude) without consciously thinking about it. It will become a habit.

Encourage your child to take advantage of every opportunity to do the thing that he is trying to make a habit. Let's help our children take the same route each time until they can do it on auto-pilot.

*Every time we do
a thing helps to
form the habit of
doing it.*

Chapter 6

Why Nagging Doesn't Work

I nag them and I nag them, but it does no good.” Most of us can testify to the truth of that statement. But I never understood why nagging doesn’t work until I started to study Charlotte’s habit-training principles. Now it makes sense.

Let’s say that you’re trying to teach your child to hang up her coat when she takes it off. In order to make that action a habit, she needs to repeatedly and consciously think through the hang-up-my-coat-when-I-take-it-off neuron route. (Remember the neuron routes we talked about in chapter 6?)

Now, let’s say you come into the room and trip over her coat. The easiest thing to do is to call her into the room and say, “I’ve told you before, hang up your coat when you take it off!” She obediently picks it up and hangs it in the closet, but . . . and here’s the key . . . her brain didn’t initiate the idea, so you just reinforced the wrong neuron route.

You just reinforced the do-what-mom-says-to-do neuron route. That's a completely different route from the one you want her to mentally travel. And that explains why once we start nagging, we find that we're always having to nag in order to make something happen. We are reinforcing the do-what-mom-says-to-do route, which means the child will constantly wait until mom says what to do!

“I'm sure I am always telling her'—to keep her drawers neat, or to hold up her head and speak nicely, or to be quick and careful about an errand, says the poor mother, with tears in her eyes; and indeed this, of 'always telling' him or her is a weary process for the mother; dull, because hopeless” (Vol. 2, p. 1734).

*As for any
impression on
his character,
any habit really
formed, all this
labour is without
result.*

So, let's say you just came into the room and tripped over your daughter's coat . . . again. You call your child into the room, and you say something like this: “I promised I would help you remember.” That's all. If she still doesn't understand, you can pointedly look at the coat on the floor. Little hints might be needed at first. But you wait until the mental lightbulb goes off in her head and that will start those neurons traveling the hang-up-my-coat-when-I-take-it-off route. Do you see the difference? She thought of it. She made the mental effort.

Yes, it might be faster to nag. Yes, it sometimes seems easier to nag. But think of the long-term effects. You will have to continue to nag whenever you want something done.

“But, perhaps, even his mother does not know how unutterably dreary is this 'always telling,' which produces nothing, to the

child. . . . As for any impression on his character, any habit really formed, all this labour is without result” (Vol. 2, p. 174).

Nagging doesn't work. Stop nagging and start forming habits.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Habit, in the hands of the mother, is as his wheel to the potter, his knife to the carver—the instrument by means of which she turns out the design she has already conceived in her brain” (Vol. 1, p. 97).



“By Education is a discipline, is meant the discipline of habits formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body” (Vol. 1, Preface).



“Having in a few—the fewer the better—earnest words pointed out the miseries that must arise from this fault, and the duty of overcoming it, and having so got the (sadly feeble) will of the child on the side of right-doing, she simply sees that for weeks together the fault does not recur” (Vol. 1, p. 120).



“What we must guard against in the training of children is the danger of their getting into the habit of being prodded to every duty and every effort” (Vol. 3, p. 39).



“Fred must train himself, and you must feed him with motives. Run over with him what we have been saying about attention. Let him know how the land lies; that you cannot help him, but that if he wants to make a man of himself he must make himself attend and remember. Tell him it will be a stand-up fight, for this habit is contrary to nature. He will like that; it is boy nature to show fight, and the bigger and blacker you make the other side, the more will he like to pitch in” (Vol. 5, p. 96).

Chapter 7

Mom's Habits

Whenever other moms and I discuss habit training, invariably the same question arises: “How can I teach my child a habit when I don’t have it myself?”

It’s a great question. If we insist that our children learn to be orderly while we struggle to find the car keys again, we feel like hypocrites. But if we decide not even to try to teach them orderliness, we feel guilty. So we start dreading that list of habits because they seem to point an accusing finger at our own lives.

Let me encourage you to look at the list of habits, not as intimidating fault-finders, but as wonderful opportunities for growth and freedom. You see, a good habit will serve us well, but a bad habit becomes a taskmaster.

Let’s face it, don’t we feel enslaved to our bad habits? Charlotte aptly described the situation: “Each of us has in his possession an exceedingly good servant or a very bad master, known as Habit” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208).

So take a look at the habits and determine which one you want

to make your servant. It may be the same habit that you want your child to work on or it may be totally different. But select one habit to concentrate on for yourself.

Embrace the truth that it's never too late to instill a habit in your own life. Charlotte said, "It is pleasant to know that, even in mature life, it is possible by a little persistent effort to acquire a desirable habit" (Vol. 1, p. 135).

Our problem comes with that glaring phrase "a little persistent effort." Yes, it will take effort to cultivate that good habit. And here is where your children will benefit from your experience. Your victories, struggles, temptations, and progress will offer a prime opportunity to show your children what it means to depend upon God while putting forth personal effort. They need to learn this principle! Charlotte encouraged us, "Above all, 'watch unto prayer' and teach your child dependence upon divine aid in this warfare of the spirit; but, also, the absolute necessity for his own efforts" (Vol. 2, p. 176).

We must depend upon God to give us the strength and even the desire to change; but at the same time, we cannot sit back with our old bad habit clutched tightly in our hands, doing nothing about it.

Oh, but what about those times when we fail? Dear friend, those times are another opportunity to teach our children an important concept: nobody's perfect. We all make mistakes. Therefore, we need to offer grace and encouragement to each other, because we're all in the same boat.

Your children can learn valuable lessons from habits that you don't have . . . yet.

It is pleasant to know that, even in mature life, it is possible by a little persistent effort to acquire a desirable habit.

Chapter 8

Living Examples

I love the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I still remember the year I received the set for Christmas. I was thrilled! I think I've read the books through ten times; thirteen, if you count reading them aloud to the children.

Now that I'm older, I identify more with Ma; but when I was younger, I often identified with Laura. Her experiences had an influence on me. For example, when I was helping to weed the garden in the middle of a hot summer day, I remembered how she had trampled hay in the sun and trampled it so long that her legs ached. Somehow that Garth Williams illustration of Laura stomping through the hay with her bonnet flapping and her hair unbraided would appear in my mind's eye, and I would return to pulling weeds determinedly.

Children look for heroes and heroines. And Charlotte realized how powerful those living examples can be in habit training. As we've already learned, repetition is a necessary part of forming a habit: "We entertain the idea which gives birth to the act and the

act repeated again and again becomes the habit. ‘Sow an act,’ we are told, ‘reap a habit.’ ‘Sow a habit, reap a character.’ But we must go a step further back, we must sow the idea or notion which makes the act worth while.” (Vol. 6, p. 102).

The idea or notion that makes the act worth while is a powerful part of encouraging our children in good habits. Motivation is key, and living examples can be effective motivators. Somehow the living example adds dignity to the effort and motivates them (and us) to keep going.

For example, if your son is having trouble getting out of bed in the mornings, “You tell a child that the Great Duke slept in so narrow a bed that he could not turn over,

*We must sow the
idea or notion
which makes the
act worth while.*

because, said he, ‘When you want to turn over it’s time to get up.’ The boy does not wish to get up in the morning, but he does wish to be like the hero of Waterloo. You stimulate him to act upon this idea day after day for a month or so, until the habit is formed, and it is just as easy as not to get up in good time” (Vol. 2, p. 125).

Living examples can be characters in living books or real people who exhibit the character trait or habit that you are trying to instill in your child. Choose your living example carefully, then introduce him or her to your child and get out of the way.

Once the heroic idea makes itself at home in the child’s heart, there’s no telling how many weeds may be pulled.

Chapter 9

Natural Consequences

Trust me, you're not going to like it."
My little girl's big brown eyes peered solemnly across the table. "But I want to try it."

"If you try it, you will have to sit there until you drink it all. Do you understand?"

Her eyes lit up. "Yes."

"All right, you may try it, but you'll have to drink the whole thing and it won't taste good."

My daughter learned two important lessons that day. First, actions have consequences. Second, it takes a long time to force down a glass of lemonade mixed with milk.

Consequences are powerful learning tools—whether positive or negative consequences. Charlotte encouraged us to use consequences as part of habit training. She also observed that the closer those consequences are related to the child's conduct, the

more effective they will be.

“There is a *law* by which all rewards and punishments should be regulated: they should be *natural*, or, at any rate, the *relative* consequences of conduct” (Vol. 1, p. 148).

For example, if the child is trying to learn the habit of full attention to her lessons, set a time limit in which she must finish her lesson correctly. If she finishes early, let her have those extra minutes to do whatever she would like before the next lesson.

“Prompt action on the child’s part should have the reward of absolute leisure, time in which to do exactly as she pleases, not granted as a favour, but accruing (without any words) as a right” (Vol. 1, p. 121).

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. On the other hand, if we dawdle and get distracted, we must face the consequence of completing the work at another, less convenient time and living in a dirty house in the meantime.

Natural consequences can be very effective. The only problem is that it takes more effort on our part to think of an appropriate natural consequence and to see it through.

“It is evident that to administer rewards and punishments on this principle requires patient consideration and steady determination on the mother’s part. She must consider with herself what fault of

It is evident that to administer rewards and punishments on this principle requires patient consideration and steady determination on the mother’s part.

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." (Vol. 1, p. 148).

But trust me, when a child learns a lesson through a natural consequence, she remembers it for a long time. Just ask my daughter.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“A habit is set up by following out an initial idea with a long sequence of corresponding acts” (Vol. 2, p. 125).



“We entertain the idea which gives birth to the act and the act repeated again and again becomes the habit” (Vol. 6, p. 102).



“Each of us has in his possession an exceedingly good servant or a very bad master, known as Habit” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208).



“She goes to the door, and calls pleasantly, ‘Johnny!’ Johnny has forgotten all about the door; he wonders what his mother wants, and, stirred by curiosity, comes back, to find her seated and employed as before. She looks up, glances at the door, and says, ‘I said I should try to remind you.’ ‘Oh, I forgot,’ says Johnny, put upon his honour; and he shuts the door that time, and the next, and the next” (Vol. 1, p. 123).



“The education of habit is successful in so far as it enables the mother to let her children alone, not teasing them with perpetual commands and directions—a running fire of Do and Don’t; but letting them go their own way and grow, having first secured that they will go the right way, and grow to fruitful purpose” (Vol. 1, p. 134).

Chapter 10

Expectant Encouragement

This morning as I was walking up to the entrance of the grocery store, I heard a mother talking to her children off to one side. She was evidently waiting for the three little ones to climb in and get settled in the shopping cart. What caught my attention was how she was “motivating” them. Her words went something like this: “This is why I hate coming to the grocery store with you; you always take so long.” And as she spoke, she looked around for someone to sympathize with her plight.

My heart sank and I immediately thought of this habit-training principle of Charlotte’s: expectant encouragement. As we work with our children to instill good habits, giving them living examples and natural consequences, we need to be careful that we keep encouraging them. Our faces, tone of voice, body language, and especially the words themselves all need to communicate the fact that we believe this child is going to succeed!

Charlotte gave the example of a child who is dawdling. “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 . . .”—stop the action right there for a moment. What does her mother look like? Is she zapping her child with the infamous “evil eye” that all mothers instinctively know how to deliver?

No. Charlotte used two other words to describe the mother’s expression: “her mother’s eye is upon her, *hopeful and expectant*” (Vol. 1, p. 120).

Those two words are so important to habit training! They should moderate all aspects of the process:

1. Your brief talk with your older child to discuss the benefits of the next habit you want to help him instill should be encouraging and fill him with hope.

2. Your correctional hints that help your child to initiate his own mental reminder and go down the right neuron route should convey positive expectation.

3. The living examples you point out, who demonstrate the character trait that you and your child are working to cultivate, should be edifying.

4. When administering natural consequences, you need to communicate that you are hopeful and expect that your child will continue to improve.

Without this principle of expectant encouragement, habit training becomes a drudgery and mother becomes a drill sergeant. No matter how old we grow, we are all motivated by a person who

*Her mother’s
eye is upon her,
hopeful and
expectant.*

is “for” us—someone who unequivocally believes we can succeed and who encourages us every step of the way. Let’s be that person for our children.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“But, perhaps, even his mother does not know how unutterably dreary is this ‘always telling,’ which produces nothing, to the child. At first he is fretful and impatient under the patter of idle words; then he puts up with the inevitable; and comes at last hardly to be aware that the thing is being said. As for any impression on his character, any habit really formed, all this labour is without result; the child does the thing when he cannot help it, and evades as often as he can” (Vol. 2, p. 174).



“Do not tell him to do the new thing, but quietly and cheerfully see that he does it on all possible occasions, for weeks if need be, all the time stimulating the new idea, until it takes great hold of the child’s imagination” (Vol. 2, p. 175).



“The mother who is distrustful of her own power of steady effort may well take comfort in two facts. In the first place, she herself acquires the habit of training her children in a given habit, so that by-and-by it becomes, not only no trouble, but a pleasure to her. In the second place, the child’s most fixed and dominant habits are those which the mother takes no pains about, but which the child picks up for himself through his close observation of all that is said and done, felt and thought, in his home” (Vol. 1, pp. 136, 137).



“Mothers work wonders once they are convinced that wonders are demanded of them” (Vol. 1, p. 44).

Chapter 11

A Good Habit Is a Delight

I've made hundreds of decisions already today, and so have you. You just don't remember them because they were habits. They didn't require a lot of mental effort. For example, On which side of the bed should I get out? How should I brush my teeth? Should I start with my right foot or left foot when I put on my socks?

We do most of those things by habit, and habits reduce stress. The stress comes when you have to think about something—when you have to consciously make the decision.

And it's the same with our children. If we can make, say, obedience a habit to a child, he no longer has to deal with that effort of decision: Should I do what Mom said? When? Should I do only part of it? What might happen if I don't obey? Is that consequence worth the risk?

You see, God made our brains to form habits from repetitive

actions and thoughts in order to save us from the wear and tear of making thousands of conscious decisions every day of our lives. “Think from another point of view how the labour of life would be increased if every act of the bath, toilet, table, every lifting of the fork and use of spoon were a matter of consideration and required an effort of decision!” (Vol. 6, p. 101).

Good habits are a pleasure; they relieve us from the effort of decision. We need to keep this truth in mind. Yes, a new habit requires effort at first, but after it is established it no longer requires such an effort.

It can be hard for us parents to watch a child work hard for weeks on end to form a new habit, so after a while the tendency is to excuse an offense, just this once. After all, the child is working so hard; he deserves a break, we think. But if we allow such thoughts to generate misguided sympathy within ourselves, we will soon sabotage our child’s new habit.

This is one of the rocks that mothers sometimes split upon: they lose sight of the fact that a habit, even a good habit, becomes a real pleasure.

“When the child has really formed the habit of doing a certain thing, his mother imagines that the effort is as great to him as at first, that it is virtue in him to go on making this effort, and that he deserves, by way of reward, a little relaxation—she will let him break through the new habit a few times, and then go on again. But it is not going on; it is beginning again, and beginning in the face of obstacles. The ‘little relaxation’ she allowed her child meant the forming of another contrary habit, which must be overcome before the child gets back to where he was before” (Vol. 1, p. 122).

So next time you feel a stirring within to excuse your child from exhibiting a good habit, reconsider. Good habits are a delight.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“Nine times out of ten we begin to do a thing because we see some one else do it; we go on doing it, and—there is the habit!” (Vol. 1, p. 118).



“Every habit has its beginning. The beginning is the idea which comes with a stir and takes possession of us” (Vol. 2, pp. 229, 230).



“If we enquire into any person’s habits of life, mental preoccupation, devotion to a cause or pursuit, he will usually tell us that such and such an idea struck him. This potency of an idea is matter of common recognition. 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” (Vol. 6, p. 105).



“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” (Vol. 2, p. 173).



“There are few parents who would not labour diligently if for every month’s labour they were able to endow one of their children with a large sum of money. But, in a month, a parent may begin to form a habit in his child of such value that money is a bagatelle by comparison” (Vol. 2, p. 173).

Chapter 12

By Degrees

We got a dog last summer. She's a sweet beagle-mix named Penny. One thing we wanted to be sure to teach Penny was to greet people politely. (Our former dog had a way of attacking the front door that would scare off the pizza delivery men.) So we have worked hard over the past eighteen months to train Penny to sit on the carpet in the hallway whenever we're answering the door.

At first, answering the door was a two-person job: one to hold the dog's collar at the appointed place and one to greet the guest. After a while we were able to transition to the second person sitting with Penny, ready to grab her collar just in case, but not holding it all the time. Then we moved to the solo door-answering stage.

But I never knew how deeply the "on the carpet" command had become ingrained until I saw her trot over there and sit on her own. We were preparing to leave the house to run an errand. She saw us all gathered near the door and, determining that we were

going to open it, she took her customary place for “front door openings”: on the carpet.

Penny did not start out trotting over to the carpet on her own; training her was a process. Any kind of habit training will be a process.

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).

Did you catch that phrase?
“By degrees.”

So where are you in the process? Are you in the constant-supervision stage, just starting to instill a new habit 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 delight 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 fixate on the effort and exertion of helping your child develop a particular habit, raise your eyes and meditate on the freedom and delight that will come because of your consistent efforts.

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.

Never lose sight of the smooth and easy days. Yes, you can get there . . . by degrees.

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“The mother will have to adopt various little devices to remind him; but of two things she will be careful—that he never slips off without shutting the door; and that she never lets the matter be a cause of friction between herself and the child, taking the line of his friendly ally to help him against that bad memory of his” (Vol. 1, p. 123).



“Tact, watchfulness, and persistence are the qualities she must cultivate in herself; and, with these, she will be astonished at the readiness with which the child picks up the new habit” (Vol. 1, p. 122).



“Let us not despise the day of small things nor grow weary in well-doing” (Vol. 3, p. 23).



“We need not add that authority is just and faithful in all matters of promise-keeping; it is also considerate, and that is why a good mother is the best home-ruler; she is in touch with the children, knows their unspoken schemes and half-formed desires, and where she cannot yield, she diverts; she does not crush with a sledge-hammer, an instrument of rule with which a child is somehow never very sympathetic” (Vol. 3, p. 23).



“For let this be borne in mind, whatever ugly quality disfigures the child, he is but as a garden overgrown with weeds: the more prolific the weeds, more fertile the soil; he has within him every possibility of beauty of life and character. Get rid of the weeds and foster the flowers” (Vol. 2, p. 87)

Chapter 13

Habit Is Inevitable

I was all set to make scrambled eggs. So, of course, I flung open the lower cupboard door to the left of the stove . . . but the pan wasn't in there. None of the pans were in there. Then it dawned on me: we had rearranged the contents of the kitchen cupboards. The pans were now in the cabinet to the right of the stove.

The whole time I cracked the eggs and scrambled them in the sheepishly-recovered pan, I upbraided myself. How could I have been so absent-minded? I knew we had moved those pans. In fact, I was the one who had picked them up and set them in the other cupboard. So why had I made a beeline for the wrong cabinet?

Habit. That's why.

“We are all mere creatures of habit. We think our accustomed thoughts, make our usual small talk, go through the trivial round, the common task, without any self-determining effort of will at

all. If it were not so—if we had to think, to deliberate, about each operation of the bath or the table—life would not be worth having; the perpetually repeated effort of decision would wear us out” (Vol. 1, p. 110).

God made our brains to form habits. And from habits we will, whether we’re thinking about it or not, whether the habits are good or not. That’s a sobering thought when applied to our children.

“Habit is inevitable. If we fail to ease life by laying down habits of right thinking and right acting, habits of wrong thinking and wrong acting fix themselves of their own accord” (Vol. 6, p. 101).

If we are not intentionally cultivating good habits in our children’s lives, they will naturally form bad habits. If we do not take pains to teach our children to obey, their natural tendency will be to disobey. If we do not make the effort to instill the habit of attention in our children, they will easily form the habit of inattention.

It’s true, habit training is hard work. And we parents may want to sit back and reason that we don’t have the energy or the time to work on this thing called habits, so we’ll just let it go for now and if we get around to it in the future, we’ll add a few habits to our children’s lives then.

But the truth is that habit is inevitable. The question is not *Will our children form habits?* The children are forming habits right now—as you read this page. The question is *Which habits are they forming?*

*If we fail to ease
life by laying down
habits of right
thinking and right
acting, habits of
wrong thinking
and wrong acting
fix themselves of
their own accord.*

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
(as shown in)
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

More Charlotte Mason Quotes

“The well-brought-up child has always been a child carefully trained in good habits” (Vol. 2, p. 174).



“Power comes by doing and not by resolving, and it is habit that serves us, whether it be the habit of Latin verse or of carving” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208)



“This is the law of habit, which holds good as much in doing kindnesses as in playing the piano. Both habits come by practice; and that is why it is so important not to miss a chance of doing the thing we mean to do well” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 208)



“As for the child’s becoming the creature of habit, that is not left with the parent to determine. We are all mere creatures of habit” (Vol. 1, p. 110).



“What we can do for them is to secure that they have habits which shall lead them in ways of order, propriety, and virtue, instead of leaving their wheel of life to make ugly ruts in miry places” (Vol. 1, p. 111).



“We have lost sight of the fact that habit is to life what rails are to transport cars. It follows that lines of habit must be laid down towards given ends and after careful survey, or the joltings and delays of life become insupportable” (Vol. 6, p. 101).

Discover more secrets to smooth and easy days with *Laying Down the Rails*



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Smooth and easy days,
Isn't that what we all want
in our homes?
But how do we get it?

Charlotte Mason believed that the answer lay in developing good habits:

*“The mother who takes pains to endow her children with good habits
secures for herself smooth and easy days.”*

*Join us as we look at the common-sense ideas and practical
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These articles will help you*

- *Cultivate good habits in your child (and yourself)*
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- *Be encouraged about your own habits*
- *Learn how to motivate your child*
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*Discover the power of good habits as you continue to
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