EDUCATION AS AN ART

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CHILDREN'S QUESTIONS

From about the age of three children begin to be full of questions, and it is sometimes a matter of great difficulty for their parents to find the right answers to them. Every question demands its own individual answer, but it can be of great value, in deciding what answer to give, to have a clear idea of the kind of answer which is required. For it is altogether wrong to imagine that a little child should be given the same kind of answer as would be suitable for a child of eleven or twelve, but in a simpler form.

The range of questions which even young children will ask is truly astonishing. Indeed, in many respects the youngest children will often ask the most fundamental and far-reaching questions - on life and death, and life after death, and many subjects on which their parents have often resigned all hope of definite knowledge. A child of four (to quote an actual example) has asked these questions in the space of a few minutes:

Do men die? Will you die? Shall I die? What do the angels say to you? Are angels shy? Who made God? Do you like God? When you die do you come alive again?

It must come as something of a shock to little children if parents declare themselves unable to answer questions fundamental to a knowledge of human life, and the questions of children must be a challenge to many parents to carry their thinking to the point of becoming clear and certain on many things which they are often content to leave unsettled.
There are two things, however, to be noticed about the questions of little children; they will often ask question after question in rapid succession, as though it were not so much information they were seeking, as the satisfaction of hearing the answering voice; and they will listen with more pleasure to an imperfect answer which is spoken with love and warmth in the voice, than to a complete and final reply given in a matter-of-fact tone. It is, indeed, to a large extent true that when little children pour out their endless questions they are seeking something much deeper than the mere satisfaction of curiosity; they are seeking to bring around them the living tones of the human voice. For the voices which they hear do not remain arrested in their consciousness, as in the case with adults, but penetrate even to those deep unconscious processes which take place in the building up of the physical body. Indeed Rudolf Steiner has shown the exact connections of the sounds of the alphabet with the formation of the different organs of the body; and hence it is that Eurythmy, which expresses the various sounds of language and music in movements of the limbs, is not only an art, but can be used as a means of healing.

It is, therefore, just as much a matter of how you answer little children's questions as of what you answer. Pure, full tones of speech (and modern voices, especially those of intellectual people, are often terribly clipped and dry) not only give a child a feeling of blessing, but help him to form his bodily strength for later life. A child is first nourished by his mother-milk, and then by his mother-tongue.

But as a guide to what kind of answers little children need, it is often to be noticed that a child will supply the answer to his own questions, and not infrequently reject the one given by the adult for another of his own invention. Such answers which children give to themselves as a rule are much more full of fantasy than those which an adult would supply. A child asks: Why does the sun take the water up into the sky? and then adds: Is it for the angels to drink? Or seeing a piece of wire-netting over the funnel of a steam-roller, he asks: Why do they put that netting on it? but immediately adds: It must be to keep the birds from building their nests there.

It is not easy for an adult to copy this wonderful power of fantasy, and a certain sense of intellectual truth may often stand in the way. But it is always good to remember that what little children need is a certain living fantasy in the answers they receive. To offer them logical explanations (however true to a scientific mind) is to give them a stone when they ask for bread.

Sometimes little children's questions arise plainly from their desire to unite themselves with words to the objects around them. A child sees a caterpillar for the first time, and asks: "What is that?" "A caterpillar." "What is a caterpillar?" But what he wants from the second question is not a definition of a caterpillar in ideas, but the joyous affirmation of the reality before him; "That

is a caterpillar." "A Spae-woman lives by telling people their fortunes and interpreting their dreams," says the King of Ireland's Son, "that is why she is called a Spae-woman."

When children have passed the age of six or seven, they naturally need much more connected answers to their questions than when they were younger. They wait more consciously for the reply, instead of living in the speech which is the answer. It is at this age, for instance, that children will ask many questions about the heavenly bodies, the nature of the sun and stars, the creation of the world, etc. And ready to supply the answer are numerous Children's Encyclopedias, Newspapers, Science books, and what not, with beautiful diagrams of the Sun, a flaming ball on a black page, many times the size of the earth, or a man cut in half showing the heart like a pump, the lungs like a pair of bellows, the nervous system like a set of telegraph wires, etc. Whether or not these things are in any sense representations of the truth is not for the moment the question: though it is worth noticing that by the time scientific theories reach popular children's books they are often quite out of date, even judged by their own standards.

There will be plenty of time for children to investigate scientific theories at a later age, when they can really understand some of the conceptions on which they are based. For these scientific conceptions arose only at a very definite point in human history, and the mind of a child is not to be compared to the wave of intellectual thinking which historically brought them to birth. A child between seven and twelve or so has in him much more of the piety and luxuriant imagination of the Middle Ages. To him the stars are not vast spheres incredible millions of miles distant in space; he feels their clear shining beauty as something very close to him. The sun is not a huge stationary mass of burning gases; its rising each day fills him with a wonderful feeling of joy and thankfulness. The pictures of the heavenly bodies in mythologies are far truer to children than the distances and dimensions of modern astronomy. The Norse people said that wolves swallowed up the sun at the time of an eclipse, and to a child, who has a fine sense of the devouring quality of darkness, the nature of an eclipse is much better expressed by such an image than by a diagram of revolving shadows. For in an eclipse it is truly as though the wolves devoured the sun, and that "as though" is, after all, the furthest claim made by the true scientist. Newton did not say that the planets are attracted to the earth gravity; but that they move as though they were so attracted, and it is not his fault that men have made a dogma of a hypothesis.

It is, in fact, of real importance not to give a child scientific conceptions on these subjects too soon. They tend to destroy the vivid feeling and imagination proper to this age; and, because they are received before the child has developed the power of following the thoughts on which they are based, they become matters of faith instead of matters of knowledge. Very few people in their adult years have even the will to investigate the mathematics on which is based the Newtonian planetary system or modern atomic theories. In a sense a scientific age is the most credulous of all ages. A thousand years ago a man could at least say: "I see the sun move with my own eyes"; but to-day many a man has to say: "Somebody proved a long time ago that the sun stands still. I forget exactly who it was, and I don't know how he proved it, but it's a fact all the same."

When children begin at this age to ask, How a thing is made? it is worth while considering how much of the true explanation has real meaning for them. There are children's books to describe how everything is made, but from such books children often get a very superficial, it may almost be said glib, impression of the work men have to do in the world. Such works are generally illustrated with photographs which give children a very easy picture of various processes, but very little feeling for the real conditions under which the work is done. A few flashlight pictures of miners hacking at a seam, together with a section of a mine with the cage descending, and a child will soon think he knows all about a coal-mine, and turn to the next page to discover how a gramophone works, or what the Great Wall of China looks like. But there is something extraordinarily superficial, muddled, and uncreative about such a way of acquiring information; it is really far better for children to make their own pictures in their mind's eye from living in descriptions they hear of intense silence under the ground, of men walking to their work for miles in galleries where they cannot go upright, of the dripping of water, etc., etc. In short, they should have some such picture of the inwards of the earth as George Macdonald gives of the interior of a mountain at the beginning of the Princess and Curdie. And, above all, the mine should not be an isolated fact, but a knowledge of mining should come as part of the children's general thoughts at the time, in some connection with chemistry, perhaps, or history or geology.

One of the worst results of children's books of the "How it Works" type is that a child will often collect an extraordinary amount of theoretical information and forget to observe things which come within his own ken. Many children can describe the solar system, but do not know where the full moon rises, or what planets are in the sky. They know a lot about the assembling of a motor-car, but are very vague as to how butter or cheese or soap is made. It is always best to try to keep younger children's questions as to how things are made to those objects which they can really understand and observe, perhaps by themselves making them. Generally speaking, it is much easier to impart information to children too early than tactfully to withhold it until a better season.

But a certain reticence in answering children's questions is of great help in keeping the questioning faculty alive. For it is a sad fact that the power of asking questions only too often fades away as children grow older. It is perhaps a test of whether children's questions have been answered rightly in their younger years to see how profound are the questions they ask when they are older, and if they are readily satisfied with the answers. For by the time they reach a more intellectual understanding towards the age of fourteen they should have a strong desire to probe every question in life to the bottom, and not be lightly satisfied by theory without knowledge. For children of this age there is a deep meaning in that part of the story of Parsifal where, as a young man, he first sees the wounded Knight, but does not ask of him the question he should. Many of the questions which children should have in their hearts at this age will indeed only be answered by life itself. They stand in the threshold of life, and life will answer them; but only if they put to life the right questions.

A. C. Harwood.

A. Cecil Harwood has been a teacher and Faculty Chairman for many years at Michael Hall, Sussex. He is the author of The Way of a Child, now in its third edition, and The Recovery of Man in Childhood (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958), which was reviewed by Canon Shepherd in this bulletin, Vol. 20, No. 2, Autumn, 1959.* The above article is reprinted with the kind permission of "Child and Man", an annual magazine sponsored by the Rudolf Steiner Schools of Great Britain.