

Charlotte Mason's 20 Principles: A Synopsis of her Educational Method

Taken from the preface of Vol 6, pg xxix; this is Charlotte's original wording:

1. Children are born *persons*.
2. They are not born either good or bad, but with possibilities for good and for evil. *
3. The principles of authority on the one hand, and of obedience on the other, are natural, necessary and fundamental; but—
4. These principles are limited by the respect due to the personality of children, which must not be encroached upon whether by the direct use of fear or love, suggestion or influence, or by undue play upon any one natural desire.
5. Therefore, we are limited to three educational instruments—the atmosphere of environment, the discipline of habit, and the presentation of living ideas. The P.N.E.U. Motto is: "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life."

Summary/Rewording of
Charlotte Mason's 20 Principles

1. Children are born persons - they are not blank slates or embryonic oysters who have the potential of becoming persons. They already *are* persons.
2. Although children are born with a sin nature, they are neither all bad, nor all good. Children from all walks of life and backgrounds may make choices for good or evil.
3. The concepts of authority and obedience are true for all people whether they accept it or not. Submission to authority is necessary for any society or group or family to run smoothly.
4. Authority is not a license to abuse children, or to play upon their emotions or other desires, and adults are not free to limit a child's education or use fear, love, power of suggestion, or their own influence over a child to make a child learn.
5. The only means a teacher may use to educate children are the child's natural environment, the training of good habits and exposure to living ideas and concepts. This is what CM's motto "Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, a life" means.

6. When we say that "*education is an atmosphere*," we do not mean 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 the child's level.

7. By "*education is a discipline*," we mean the discipline of habits, formed definitely and thoughtfully, whether habits of mind or body. Physiologists tell us of the adaptation of brain structures to habitual lines of thought, *i.e.*, to our habits.

8. In 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.

9. We hold that the child's mind is no mere sac to hold ideas; but is rather, if the figure may be allowed, a spiritual organism, with an appetite for all knowledge. This is its proper diet, with which it is prepared to deal; and which it can digest and assimilate as the body does foodstuffs.

10. Such a doctrine as *e.g.* the Herbartian, that the mind is a receptacle, lays the stress of education (the preparation of knowledge in enticing morsels duly ordered) upon the teacher. Children taught on this principle are in danger of receiving much teaching with little knowledge; and the teacher's axiom

6. "Education is an atmosphere" doesn't mean that we should create an artificial environment for children, but that we use the opportunities in the environment he already lives in to educate him. Children learn from *real* things in the *real* world

7. "Education is a discipline" means that we train a child to have good habits and self-control.

8. "Education is a life" means that education should apply to body, soul and spirit. The mind needs ideas of all kinds, so the child's curriculum should be varied and generous with many subjects included.

9. The child's mind is not a blank slate, or a bucket to be filled. It is a living thing and needs knowledge to grow. As the stomach was designed to digest food, the mind is designed to digest knowledge and needs no special training or exercises to make it ready to learn.

10. Herbart's philosophy that the mind is like an empty stage waiting for bits of information to be inserted puts too much responsibility on the teacher to prepare detailed lessons that the children, for all the teacher's effort, don't learn from anyway.

is,' what a child learns matters less than how he learns it."

11. But we, believing that the normal child has powers of mind which fit him to deal with all knowledge proper to him, give him a full and generous curriculum; taking care only that all knowledge offered him is vital, that is, that facts are not presented without their informing ideas. Out of this conception comes our principle that,—

12. "*Education is the Science of Relations*"; that is, that a child has natural relations with a vast number of things and thoughts: so we train him upon physical exercises, nature lore, handicrafts, science and art, and upon many living books, for we know that our business is not to teach him all about anything, but to help him to make valid as many as may be of—

"Those first-born affinities
"That fit our new existence to
existing things."

13. In devising a SYLLABUS for a normal child, of whatever social class, three points must be considered:

(a) He requires *much* knowledge, for the mind needs sufficient food as much as does the body.

(b) The knowledge should be various, for sameness in mental diet does not create appetite (*i.e.*, curiosity)

(c) Knowledge should be communicated in well-chosen language, because his attention responds naturally to what is conveyed in literary form.

11. Instead, we believe that childrens' minds are capable of digesting real knowledge, so we provide a rich, generous curriculum that exposes children to many interesting, living ideas and concepts.

12. "Education is the science of relations" means that children have minds capable of making their own connections with knowledge and experiences, so we make sure the child learns about nature, science and art, knows how to make things, reads many living books and that they are physically fit.

13. In devising a curriculum, we provide a vast amount of ideas to ensure that the mind has enough brain food, knowledge about a variety of things to prevent boredom, and subjects are taught with high-quality literary language since that is what a child's attention responds to best.

14. As knowledge is not assimilated until it is reproduced, children should 'tell back' after a single reading or hearing: or should write on some part of what they have read.

15. A *single reading* is insisted on, because children have naturally great power of attention; but this force is dissipated by the re-reading of passages, and also, by questioning, summarising, and the like.

Acting upon these and some other points in the behaviour of mind, we find that the *educability of children is enormously greater than has hitherto been supposed*, and is but little dependent on such circumstances as heredity and environment.

Nor is the accuracy of this statement limited to clever children or to children of the educated classes: thousands of children in Elementary Schools respond freely to this method, which is based on the *behaviour of mind*.

16. There are two guides to moral and intellectual self-management to offer to children, which we may call 'the way of the will' and 'the way of the reason.'

17. *The way of the will*: Children should be taught, (a) to distinguish between 'I want' and 'I will.' (b) That the way to will effectively is to turn our thoughts from that which we desire but do not will. (c) That the best way to turn our thoughts is to think of or do some quite different thing, entertaining or interesting. (d) That after a little rest in this way, the will returns to its work with new vigour. (This adjunct of the will is familiar to us as *diversion*, whose

14. Since one doesn't really "own" knowledge until he can express it, children are required to narrate, or tell back (or write down), what they have read or heard.

15. Children must narrate after one reading or hearing. Children naturally have good focus of attention, but allowing a second reading makes them lazy and weakens their ability to pay attention the first time. Teachers summarizing and asking comprehension questions are other ways of giving children a second chance and making the need to focus the first time less urgent. By getting it the first time, less time is wasted on repeated readings, and more time is available during school hours for more knowledge. A child educated this way learns *more* than children using other methods, and this is true for all children regardless of their IQ or background.

16. Children have two guides to help them in their moral and intellectual growth - "the way of the will," and "the way of reason."

17. Children must learn the difference between "I want" and "I will." They must learn to distract their thoughts when tempted to do what they may *want* but know is not right, and think of something else, or do something else, interesting enough to occupy their mind. After a short diversion, their mind will be refreshed and able to will with renewed strength.

office it is to ease us for a time from will effort, that we may 'will' again with added power. The use of *suggestion* as an aid to the will is *to be deprecated*, as tending to stultify and stereotype character, It would seem that spontaneity is a condition of development, and that human nature needs the discipline of failure as well as of success.)

18. *The way of reason:* We teach children, too, not to 'lean (too confidently) to their own understanding'; because the function of reason is to give logical demonstration (a) of mathematical truth, (b) of an initial idea, accepted by the will. In the former case, reason is, practically, an infallible guide, but in the latter, it is not always a safe one; for, whether that idea be right or wrong, reason will confirm it by irrefragable proofs.

19. Therefore, children should be taught, as they become mature enough to understand such teaching, that the chief responsibility which rests on them *as persons* is the acceptance or rejection of ideas. To help them in this choice we give them principles of conduct, and a wide range of the knowledge fitted to them. These principles should save children from some of the loose thinking and heedless action which cause most of us to live at a lower level than we need.

20. We allow no separation to grow up between the intellectual and 'spiritual' life of children, but teach them that the Divine Spirit has constant access to their spirits, and is their Continual Helper in all the interests, duties and joys of life.

18. Children must learn not to lean too heavily on their own reasoning. Reasoning is good for logically demonstrating mathematical truth, but unreliable when judging ideas because our reasoning will justify all kinds of erroneous ideas if we really want to believe them.

19. Knowing that reason is not to be trusted as the final authority in forming opinions, children must learn that their greatest responsibility is choosing which ideas to accept or reject. Good habits of behavior and lots of knowledge will provide the discipline and experience to help them do this.

20. We teach children that all truths are God's truths, and that secular subjects are just as divine as religious ones. Children don't go back and forth between two worlds when they focus on God and then their school subjects; there is unity among both because both are of God and, whatever children study or do,

God is always with them.

~ *Charlotte Mason*

~ 2004 *L. N. Laurio*

-

* **Note** - Principle 2 should not be understood as a theological position on the doctrine of original sin, but as a belief that even poor children who were previously thought incapable of living honest lives could choose right from

wrong if they were taught. Charlotte Mason was a member in good standing of the Anglican Church of England, whose [Thirty Nine Articles](#) includes this statement: *"Original sin stands not in the following of Adam, but it is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil."*

Tammy Glaser related CM's 20 Principles to her children's homeschool experiences. You can see it [here](#).

| [CM SERIES HOME](#) | [CONCISE SUMMARIES](#) | [PARAPHRASED IN MODERN ENGLISH](#) |