

MENTAL HYGIENE

BY

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Health of mind, as well as of body, is not only productive in itself of a greater sum of enjoyment than arises from other sources, but is the only condition of our frame in which we are capable of receiving pleasure from without. — SIR JAMES MACKINTOSH.



BOSTON:
TICKNOR AND FIELDS.
1863.

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titude of objects which now seriously engage the attention of men, with no better result than to weaken, if not destroy, every conservative principle in their minds, would never be entertained, and thus a prolific source of mental deterioration would be avoided.

The prevalent views on the subject of intellectual training are responsible for much of the prevalent mental infirmity and inefficiency. And certainly the cause is perfectly adequate to the effect. We all recognize the correctness of the principle in question, in regard to physical training. We never imagine that the wrestler, or rower, or runner, can obtain the vigor and hardihood necessary for success, by sleeping on down, indulging in luxurious food, and living at ease. We know that they can be obtained only by a long-continued, arduous, uncompromising system of training. The growth and development of the mind is subjected to the operation of the same law, but we have had frequent occasions already to show how little the fact is recognized. It is worth our while to consider another error in youthful training, because it is very common and supposed to be very innocent, though calculated, beyond any other error, to impair the future efficiency of the mind. It is supposed that children are incapable of comprehending books made for the use of grown-up

people, and the idea, fully carried out, at the present day, of furnishing the youthful understanding with special helps and appliances, in the shape of juvenile books, is regarded as one of the great improvements of the age. It is consummate folly, no doubt, to put into the hands of a child a book quite beyond his power of comprehending, but in our endeavor to make everything simple and easy, to strew the path of knowledge with flowers, to remove, in short, every occasion for effort and struggle, we have erred as far to the opposite extreme.

The world has, probably, never been without juvenile books since books began to be printed; but, while in former days they were comparatively few, in the form of some simple tale or traditional legend, they are now as "thick as leaves in Vallombrosa," embracing every topic supposed to afford materials for instruction or amusement, and constituting a distinct department of literature. The object seems to be, either to bring the subject treated nearer the juvenile comprehension, by simplifying the thoughts and the language, or to render it more attractive, by blending with it a little romance, upon Lord Bacon's principle, I suppose, that "the mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure." Much of the most respectable talent of the time is engaged in supplying the demand

for these books, and this supply, joined with that which evinces no talent at all, is devoured by the child, with a rapidity unknown to the tardier movements of riper intellects. Whatever the subject which the progress of knowledge has brought forward, sooner or later it gets into the shape of a book for children, with all the accessory attractions which the ingenuity of the printer, the binder, and the engraver can furnish. Is it desired to acquaint the young pupil with the history of a certain period, or the life of a great man; it would indicate a long distance behind the times, to refer him to those immortal writings in which the events and the actors are described. There is always at hand some little book containing the desired information in miniature, divested of all hard words and troublesome reflections, and, peradventure, invested in the garb of an attractive tale. Is it desired to inculcate some important truth in religion, suitable to guide the life and keep the heart from evil; it is thought that the purpose cannot better be accomplished than by means of a story abounding in incident and adventure, and ending, probably, with love and a marriage. Is a lesson in morals to be stamped on the tender mind; still the never-failing little book will render unnecessary any recurrence to such obsolete authors as Johnson or Paley. Is botany

or chemistry, or physics, to be taught; still the means are the same. Even the beautiful simplicity of the sacred oracles has not saved them from being converted into namby-pamby, to accommodate them to the taste of the rising generation, and high dignitaries of the church are not wanting to give their sanction to the deplorable preparation. In short, nothing seems to be too profound, nothing too simple, nothing too high, nothing too ignoble, to be brought within the compass of this class of books. They have come upon the land, like the locusts of Egypt. They are piled up, ceiling-high, on the shelves of every bookstore; they fill the closets and tables of every domestic dwelling, from the hovel to the palace; and, as if they were the most approved means of leading the steps of the young into the paths of virtue, and enlightening their minds with a knowledge of the truth, they form the great staple of every Sunday-school library in the country.

It is a sufficient objection to this juvenile literature, that it vitiates the taste, weakens the understanding, and indisposes and unfits it for a more elevated kind of reading. By having the results of science and art, the lessons of morality and religion, ever presented in the garb of a story, with lively incidents and an agreeable

ending, — vice punished and virtue rewarded, according to the most approved methods of romance, — the youth imbibes false ideas of the stern realities of life, and finds the common and unadulterated truth too insipid to awaken any interest in his mind. Indeed, these books are read, or, more correctly speaking, devoured, not so much for the sake of instruction as amusement; not so much for the principles they may profess to inculcate, as the incidents and adventures in which they abound. This result is just what might have been expected; and I submit to those who have better means of judging, whether, as a consequence of this result, the youth of our time do not manifest a marked unwillingness to give their attention to anything calculated to excite any activity of the higher mental faculties. Many a man, I imagine, who finds his children arrived at their twelfth or thirteenth year with no other intellectual furnishing than such books supply, bethinks himself, all at once, that long before that age he loved to resort to his father's library, and hang with delight over the pages of some unwieldy history or book of voyages; or, in the absence of more attractive material, plunge into the mazes of controversial divinity. The lads of this generation would stand aghast at sight of the huge folios and formidable octavos over which their fathers

spent many a Saturday afternoon, laying up treasures of knowledge as enduring as life. Their mental aliment must be subjected to a process of preparation, whereby it is deprived of its bones and sinews, and seasoned with stimulants to provoke a fastidious and jaded appetite. If this is a fair statement of the effects that have arisen from the abundance of juvenile books, it scarcely admits of a question, whether the youth of former times were not more fortunate, who, after having mastered the contents of every book in the house and neighborhood, looked forward with a pleasurable impatience, as Daniel Webster says he and his brother were accustomed to, to the advent of the new-year's almanac. I doubt not those great men derived more benefit from that humble annual than they would from an unlimited supply of juvenile books; for in less than twenty-four hours, every line of poetry was committed to memory, every date fixed in the mind, every apothegm duly pondered, and every arithmetical puzzle solved.*

We greatly underrate the youthful intellect in

* It will be observed, I trust, that the objection is urged against the excessive use of juvenile books, without implicating the character of any particular writer. Many an admirable book has been written for children, and the names of Barbauld, Edgeworth, and Sedgwick, are associated with memories as profitable as they are pleasant.

supposing that a special class of books is needful for furnishing it with intelligible and attractive reading. The mistake is the more curious, inasmuch as it occurs by the side of another of the opposite character. The very boys and girls who are practically supposed to be unable to read a history except in a diluted state, are kept, for years together, upon the study of grammar — a science which, even in its elementary state, is of a most abstruse and metaphysical character. And many other school studies, such as geometry, algebra, rhetoric, mental philosophy, require a far greater reach of intellect than many of those works which are the glory of English literature. I believe that those works will furnish an abundance of suitable reading for a youth ten years old and upwards; and no one can suppose that they are not better adapted to improve the taste and cultivate the higher powers of the mind than the juvenile books of the day. He may not perceive, at every step, the keen sagacity of Gibbon, nor fully appreciate the quiet graces of Prescott and Irving, but he will learn on good authority the facts of history, and feel somewhat of its grandeur and dignity. He may not perceive the full significance of Shakespeare's greatest thoughts, nor be charmed with the harmony of Spenser's verse, "in lines of linked

sweetness long drawn out," but he will catch an occasional glimpse of the clear upper sphere in which the poet moves, and fix in his mind many an image of purity and loveliness, of tried virtue and high-souled sacrifice, that will preserve it, in some measure, from the contamination of ignoble thoughts and desires. I think no one will maintain that boys or girls twelve years old, of fair parts and tolerably educated, are incapable of understanding and enjoying the greater part of Addison, Pope, Goldsmith, Robertson, Hume, Cowper, Burns, Southey, Macaulay, Scott, and Crabbe. And yet how many such youth there are, who never read beyond a page or two of these authors, nor even heard their names! Indeed, if a person, recollecting the delightful hours they furnished him when first gratifying his love of intellectual pleasures, should propose them to the youth of this generation, he would be likely to be regarded with a look of curiosity, as a man born out of due time, or, at any rate, quite behind the age which has provided more suitable aliment for the tender mind, in the preparations of Peter Parley and his prolific school. This is a serious matter and well-deserving attention; but I can only say, in conclusion, that we may carry our systems of school-instruction to the highest point of perfection, yet, so long as the

juvenile literature of our times maintains its present place in the popular estimation, it will be in vain to expect a generation of vigorous, self-relying, healthy minds. Important, however, as all this is, it is but incidental and subordinate to a point of still greater importance.

The habit of reading books that excite but little activity of thought becomes too strongly fixed to be weakened by the higher aims and purer tastes of riper years. The youth has read, not that he might learn to think, but that he might be amused, and as the appetite only grows by what it feeds upon, increase of years produces no change in the object of his reading. True, the books of children have lost their wonted power to charm ; but now their place is supplied by another and far more objectionable kind. The faculty of the mind chiefly addressed in both is the imagination, or that power which forms ideal creations abundantly endowed with those incidents and attributes that constitute the greatest charms in actual realities. In earlier years, the pleasure thus obtained is undoubtedly innocent though enervating, and has in it no taint of sin. But at the later period we are now considering, a change has come over the whole spirit of the youth. A new order of emotions, desires, and aspirations has arisen within him, and a veil has been lifted

from before his vision, disclosing creations of exquisite loveliness whose earthly types are ever near to enliven his conceptions and give them an almost objective existence. The relations of the sexes, scarcely thought of before, have become the predominant subject of his thoughts, and he feels the witchery of an irresistible spell stealing over his senses, and polarizing, if I may borrow a term from physical science, the very fountains of his being. To meet this state of things, to touch the chord that nature has strung, apparently, for the very purpose, there has appeared the description of publications just alluded to. Although their predominant features are love and romance, they have few points in common with the works of the great masters of fictitious writing. Although the course of true love is a constant ingredient of the latter, yet it is often subordinate to a higher object, and the impurities with which it is associated are indicative of bad manners rather than bad morals. But censurable as the works of some of the older writers undoubtedly are, on this score, they are altogether too tame, too much hampered by a decent respect for decorum, to fulfil exactly the object in question, — that of stimulating the passions of a tender mind enervated by vicious training, and kindling with new and untried desires. Though

embracing much that deserves no stronger epithet of censure than foolish or frivolous, yet the greater part of this kind of literature is calculated, if not designed, to debase the tone of moral sentiment, to suggest impure ideas, and send forth the imagination to wander into unhallowed paths.

Now let us consider the youth in that transition period which separates boyhood from manhood. His mind has become enfeebled by an incessant repletion of juvenile literature, and is unconscious of any manly thoughts or lofty aspirations gained by communion with a higher order of intellect than his own. In this condition the allurements of sense are spread before him in every variety of form, and his ear is open to every siren song that floats upon the breeze. He has much leisure, which his tastes dispose him to occupy with reading, and when we consider his previous habits and the present epoch of his life, we cannot be surprised that he should make the acquaintance of this description of books, and abandon himself, body and soul, to their allurements. I say advisedly, body and soul, for the mischievous effects are as obvious and as ruinous upon the one as they are on the other. By a law of our constitution, violent mental emotions thrill through the bodily frame, and this participates in the vital

movement. Here, body and mind act and react on each other, and often, so far as the final result is concerned, it seems to be immaterial whether the first impression be made on one or the other. In these books, the tender passion is presented with none of those refinements with which it is associated in pure and cultivated minds. It is designedly made carnal and provocative of impure desire, and the youth who surrenders himself to its seductions becomes thenceforth a stranger to every manly sentiment, while his imagination revels in a world of sense, filled with the charms of a Mahommedan paradise. From this point there is but one step, it is true, to actual, overt licentiousness; but a lingering feeling of shame, a faint sense of responsibility, and a timidity natural under the circumstances, often hold him back from taking that step, and he is contented to indulge in secret, with such means as nature has provided. Month after month, year after year, are spent in this dreamy existence, the unholy flame constantly nourished by the kind of reading in question, and its debasing effects as constantly assisted by the habit of self-indulgence. Sooner or later there begins a series of pathological phenomena which, with more or less rapidity, but usually covering a period of years, conduct their miserable subject to mental and physical

ruin. I forbear to dwell on the details of this fearful condition,—the muscular system faltering under the least exertion, and constantly oppressed by a sense of lassitude and fatigue; the nervous system overcharged with irritability, affected by the slightest emotion, and turned into a source of weariness and pain; the mind tortured almost to distraction by groundless anxiety and self-reproach, harassed by a sense of guilt, and vague apprehension of a future disclosing not a single ray of hope, and revolving thoughts of suicide, as the only means of escaping from the ever-gnawing worm. Neither would I dwell upon the more common phasis of this condition: the cloud of delusion that rapidly envelopes the whole mind and distorts all its relations; the utter loss of the power of connected thought; the suspicions, jealousies, and ungovernable impulses that precipitate the individual into some fearful act of violence; and that final brutalization of our nature, where, for years together, no spark of humanity gleams through the loathsome prison-house of flesh. But I implore the teacher and the parent to think of these things, and prevent, as they probably may, an evil which they cannot cure. Could they witness occasionally, as I do every day, the melancholy results that may be fairly attributed to that kind of mental training which

stimulates the imagination and the lower moral sentiments, they would not suspect me of representing an infrequent accident in the light of a great and wide-spreading evil. In every hospital for the insane there may be seen a form of disease preëminently loathsome and difficult of cure, many cases of which, I doubt not, may be traced to the kind of reading in question. How many a noble intellect that once gave promise of the soundest fruit has thus been blasted, and with it the hopes, the pride, the solace, of many loving hearts, the world generally has but little conception.

From what has been said, it cannot be doubted that the people of our times live in an atmosphere of excitement, which, without the most prudent management, is calculated to impair the vigor of the mind and facilitate the invasion of disease. In order the better to estimate the psychological effects of this general fact, it may be well to contemplate some of the phases of that remarkable change which has come over the whole face of society, within the last fifty or seventy-five years. Take, for instance, as particularly applicable to our purpose, the family of a mechanic, or farmer, or small trader, in some country town of New England, at the beginning of that period, and compare it, in regard to its mental movements,