



*A  
Charlotte Mason  
Handbook*

*Notes on implementing a family-centered,  
“living” education.*

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At a time when most children were educated only to a minimum standard, Charlotte Maria Shaw Mason challenged the accepted view of her time and stressed that '*children are persons,*' and that teachers and parents should treat them as individuals. Children, she said, need to be stimulated from an early age by a broad curriculum, not simply to be trained to read, write and count. She believed that this broad curriculum should contain the best literature, the best art, the best contemporary science, in fact, the best of everything. In recent years Charlotte Mason's educational philosophy has found favor among a wide range of home-educating families. From unschoolers to the classical minded and everything in between, parents and children have employed Miss Mason's techniques with great success. In charting a course for a Family-Centered 'living' education this small handbook is offered to parents as a guide for implementing the ideas and methods of Charlotte Mason. Rather than an all-or-nothing approach, parents are encouraged to pick and choose from these ideas in whatever way they find helpful for their particular situation and home. All the techniques presented here can be easily adapted for use with any curriculum.

### **What is a 'living' education?**

A living education as defined by Charlotte Mason, is one where a child is exposed to and acquainted with a large and various amount of '*things and thoughts*'. He is educated through the use of many living books, the study of nature, physical exercise, handicrafts, science, art and music. Charlotte Mason taught that ideas were the food of the mind and that it was of the utmost importance that children be given a wide and varied diet of this all essential food. Through the use of living books, real life experiences and conversations, a child's mind should be fed on the good and the sublime, the honorable and true, because, as Miss Mason writes, '*out of our ideas comes our conduct of life.*'

*"It is for their own sakes that children should get knowledge. The power to take a generous view of men and their motives, to see where the greatness of a given character lies, to have one's judgment of present events illustrated and corrected by historic and literary parallels, to have, indeed, the power of comprehensive judgment—these are admirable assets within the power of every one according to the measure of his mind; and these are not the only gains which knowledge affords."* (PE pg. 303)

Charlotte Mason's philosophy directly influenced her methods of teaching, and the full benefits of this type of education can only truly be realized by understanding the foundational ideas behind it. The following works are recommended for a fuller grasp of Miss Mason's philosophy of education:

- **Vol. 1 - 6 of Miss Mason's own writings on education.**
- **When Children Love to Learn** edited by Elaine Cooper
- **For the Children's Sake** by Susan Schaeffer McCauley
- **Charlotte Mason Study Guide** by Penny Gardner
- **A Charlotte Mason Companion** by Karen Andreola



*“But education should be a science of proportion, and any one subject that assumes undue importance does so at the expense of other subjects which a child's mind should deal with.”*

*Charlotte Mason (PE pg. 231)*



## **Applying Charlotte Mason’s methods in your home:**

**Narration:** Often called the “cornerstone” of a Charlotte Mason education, narration is certainly a large part of what makes a living education unique. Narration is the process of retelling what has been learned or read. It is a point by point account rather than a word for word retelling. Narrations are begun orally, but as the child grows older and his writing skills improve (approx. age 10 to 12), narrations will be written as well. Some children will narrate more than others, but don’t consider a short narration a bad narration. The important thing is that the child has grasped the ideas of what he has read or been taught. As the child grows older his narrations will move naturally from the simple retelling type to the more thoughtful essay and composition type. In working with a child’s learning style, narrations can be done in many creative ways such as painting, drawing, building, sculpting, play-acting, etc. Narration is fundamental to a ‘living’ education. It sharpens the mind and fosters the habit of attention and it is the springboard for the discussion and assimilation of ideas, a *key component* of true learning.

**Recitation** - Calling it *‘The Children's Art,’* Charlotte Mason believed that all children have it in them to recite; *“it is an imprisoned gift waiting to be delivered.”* The child should recite poetry and scripture beautifully, with delicate rendering of each nuance of meaning, so that he *“becomes to the listener the interpreter of the author's thought.”* The ideas should be kept within the child's range of understanding so that the expression of it becomes his own. *“I hope that my readers will train their children in the art of recitation; in the coming days, more even than in our own will it behove every educated man and woman to be able to speak effectively in public; and, in learning to recite you learn to speak.”* (HE pg. 224)

**Reading and the use of Living Books** - A living book is a book that engages the mind, inspires the imagination and delights the heart. Whether fiction or non-fiction, a living book makes a topic come alive. Whenever possible Charlotte Mason encouraged the use of living books in the place of textbooks. *“From their earliest days they should get the habit of reading literature which they should take hold of for themselves, much or little, in their own way.”* (PE pg. 191) First-hand exposure to great and noble ideas through books is the surest way to a living education.

The habit of reading should begin early, and as soon as he can read at all, the child should read for himself, and to himself, history, legends, fairy tales, and more. The child should be trained from the very beginning to think that one reading of any lesson is enough to enable him to narrate what he has read. In this way he will get into the habit of slow, careful reading, *“intelligent even when it is silent, because he reads with an eye to the full meaning of every clause.”* Miss Mason laments; *“The most common and the monstrous defect in the education of the day is that children fail to acquire the habit of reading. Knowledge is conveyed to them by lessons and talk, but the studious habit of using books as a means of interest and delight is not acquired.”* (HE pg. 227)

**Reading Instruction** - Primarily based on sight vocabulary, but including the use and teaching of phonics, reading instruction begins in a very natural and easy form. Even beginning readers, Charlotte Mason taught, ought to have something interesting to read. Nursery rhymes, rather than dull first readers, are preferred making sight words teaching necessary so as to allow the child to read real books as early as possible. Phonics is introduced as needed for decoding.

**Transcription** - Commonly called *copywork*, transcription is the child's earliest practice in writing. Beginning at the age of seven or eight the child copies in a slow and neat hand favorite passages of a work of well-written literature. The child should be taught to hold his pen or pencil properly and sit correctly so as to lessen fatigue and strain. *"A sense of beauty in their writing should carry them over this stage of their work with pleasure."* (HE pg. 238) Transcription is also an introduction to spelling. In this way the child looks at the word, closes his eyes and "sees a picture of it" and then writes it from memory. Miss Mason recommended that no more than ten or fifteen minutes should be given to these early writing lessons.

**Spelling and Dictation** - Being able to spell well, Charlotte Mason maintained, depends upon the power of the eye to take a detailed picture of a word. This power and in fact, *habit* is to be encouraged with the child from the very beginning of reading. When the child reads the word 'cup' he should be taught to 'see' the word with his eyes shut. This habit of 'imaging' will enable him to remember the spelling much larger and more difficult words later on. Dictation as an aid to spelling is done by way of having the child look carefully beforehand at the passage to be dictated, concentrating especially on any words he thinks he may have difficulty with. These words can be written out and studied for a short period before the dictation begins. When he is ready, dictate the passage to him clause by clause, repeating each clause only once. While you should dictate in a way as to indicate punctuation you should not however actually *tell* the child the punctuation.

**Composition** - *"Lessons on 'composition' should follow the model of that famous essay on 'Snakes in Ireland' -- 'There are none.'"* For a child under nine, composition comes through narration. He may write a part and then narrate a part. Or, if he prefers, he may write an entire account of a field trip, a nature walk, his history lesson or any thing he knows about that inspires him to write. Before he is ten, a child who have been in the habit of using 'living' books will write well with ease; that is, Miss Mason insists, if he has not been hampered by instructions. Charlotte Mason recommends that children not even be taught punctuation until they notice how these things occur in their books. *"Our business is to provide children with material in their lessons, and leave the handling of such material to themselves. If we would believe it, composition is as natural as jumping and running to children who have been allowed due use of books. They should narrate in the first place, and they will compose, later readily enough; but they should not be taught 'composition.'"* (HE pg. 247)

**Grammar** - Early grammar lessons are simple. Grammar, Charlotte Mason tells us, is a logical study, dealing with sentences and the places that words occupy in them. The child must first learn what a sentence *is* before he can learn the parts of speech in a sentence. Simple lessons of noun, verb and subject are all he needs to begin. Much reading of well written literature can go a long way towards teaching the child proper sentence formation.

**Arithmetic & Mathematics** - *"The chief value of arithmetic, like that of the higher mathematics, lies in the training it affords the reasoning powers, and in the habits of insight, readiness, accuracy, intellectual truthfulness it engenders. There is no one subject in which good teaching effects more, as there is none in which slovenly teaching has more mischievous results."* (HE pg. 254) In a "living" education, the ability to reason takes priority over the ability to work sums. Emphasis is placed on story problems and working with numbers that are within the child's comprehension. A manipulative-based program is preferred. *"How living would Geometry become in the light of the discoveries of Euclid as he made them!"* (PE pg. 233)

**Natural Philosophy** - Sometimes referred to as *nature study*, natural philosophy is the firsthand observation of nature. Charlotte Mason tells us that *“that there is no part of a child's education more important than that he should lay, by his own observation, a wide basis of facts towards scientific knowledge in the future.”* Much time spent out of doors each day in all weather and in different environments is necessary for students of all ages. For children younger than six “school time” should consist primarily of time spent outside. *“He must live hours daily in the open air, and, as far as possible, in the country; must look and touch and listen; must be quick to note, consciously, every peculiarity of habit or structure, in beast, bird, or insect; the manner of growth and fructification of every plant. He must be accustomed to ask why -- Why does the wind blow? Why does the river flow? Why is a leaf-bud sticky? And do not hurry to answer his questions for him; let him think his difficulties out so far as his small experience will carry him.”* (HE pg. 264) In the younger grades, science too is taught through nature study and in the upper grades through ‘living’ science books, and first hand experiences.

**Geography** - Geography is taught through nature study. Distance, direction, and landform are all easily taught and understood by firsthand experience. *“It is probable that a child's own neighbourhood will give him opportunities to learn the meaning of hill and dale, pool and brook, watershed, the current, bed, banks, tributaries of a brook, the relative positions of villages and towns; and all this local geography he must be able to figure roughly on a plan done with chalk on a rock, or with walking stick in the gravel, perceiving the relative distances and situations of the places he marks.”* (PE pg. 78)

**History** - Much that Charlotte Mason writes about the teaching of geography applies equally to that of history. *“Here, too, is a subject which should be to the child an inexhaustible storehouse of ideas, should enrich the chambers of his House Beautiful with a thousand tableaux, pathetic and heroic, and should form in him, insensibly, principles whereby he will hereafter judge of the behaviour of nations, and will rule his own conduct as one of a nation.”* (HE pg. 279) History is taught with primary sources and well-written history books, and literature can be taught along with history. If the child is studying the Revolutionary War for example, he would at the same time read works of American literature written at that time. *“Let him know the great people and the common people, the ways of the court and of the crowd. Let him know what other nations were doing while we at home were doing thus and thus. If he come to think that the people of another age were truer, larger-hearted, simpler-minded than ourselves, that the people of some other land were, at one time, at any rate, better than we, why, so much the better for him.”* (HE pg. 281)

**The Arts** - In addition to books, the child should be exposed to great minds through art, music and poetry. Picture study is a wonderful way to introduce the child to the great artists of our world. The child studies the picture and then attempts to reproduce it from memory. *“Children have 'Art' in them. -- With art, as with so many other things in a child, we must believe that it is there, or we shall never find it. Therefore we set twig or growing flower before a child and let him deal with it as he chooses. He will find his own way to form and colour, and our help may very well be limited at first to such technical matters as the mixing of colours and the like.”* (HE pg. 313)

Of music, Miss Mason writes: *“Many great men have put their beautiful thoughts, not into books, or pictures, or buildings, but into musical score, to be sung with the voice or played on instruments, and so full are these musical compositions of the minds of their makers, that people who care for music can always tell who has composed the music they hear, even if they have never heard the particular movement before.”* (O pg. 31) Let the child listen to great music by the world's great composers.

**Schedule** - A 'living' education is teacher-directed, not child-led. Academics in Charlotte Mason's schools were orderly and scheduled. However, the child should be encouraged [and provided the time] to pursue many personal interests outside of academics.

**Short lessons** - With an emphasis on excellent execution and focused attention, short lessons and variation of the day's scheduled activities work to help keep the child on task without over-stressing his brain.

**World Languages** - Charlotte Mason encouraged proficiency in at least one other language, specifically French, as well as study in Latin. *"French should be acquired as English is, not as a grammar, but as a living speech. To train the ear to distinguish and the lips to produce the French vocables is a valuable part of the education of the senses, and one which can hardly be undertaken too soon."* For the child receiving a 'living' education, any language he may encounter frequently, apart from his native tongue, he would do well to be able to speak with some degree of fluency. Latin, for a Catholic child especially, is always a good idea.

**Drill** - Each day time should be set aside for some form of physical fitness routine. Daily walks and a "drill" which may include stretching, breathing exercises, calisthenics, dancing, singing, and games.

**Religion** - *"Before all these ranks Religion, including our relations of worship, loyalty, love and service to God; and next in order, perhaps, the intimate interpersonal relations implied in such terms as self-knowledge, self-control."*

**Bible Lessons** - A 'living' education would not be complete without recourse to the most 'living' book of all, the Holy Bible. Children enjoy the Bible and we must be careful not to water it down and make it so that they do not even have to dig for the meaning of the words. *"We are apt to believe that children cannot be interested in the Bible unless its pages be watered down -- turned into the slipshod English we prefer to offer them. We are probably quite incapable of measuring the religious receptivity of children. Nevertheless, their fitness to apprehend the deep things of God is a fact with which we are called to 'deal prudently,' and to deal reverently."*



*The ideas presented here are but a taste of the cornucopia which makes up Charlotte Mason's writings. Greater detail on all the subjects listed can be found in her six volume homeschooling series.*

Charlotte Mason had much to say on the subject of habit. Habits as a discipline of the child's will and behavior. Habits of thinking and doing.

***“The formation of habits is education, and Education is the formation of habits.”***

*“The nature of the child— his human nature— being the sum of what he is as a human being, and what he is in right of the stock he comes of, and what he is as the result of his own physical and mental constitution—this nature is incalculably strong. The problem before the educator is to give the child control over his own nature, to enable him to hold himself in hand as much in regard to the traits we call good, as to those we call evil: —many a man makes shipwreck on the rock of what he grew up to think his characteristic virtue—his open-handedness, for instance.”*

*“Divine Grace works on the Lines of Human Effort.—In looking for a solution of this problem, I do not undervalue the Divine grace—far otherwise; but we do not always make enough of the fact that Divine grace is exerted on the lines of enlightened human effort; that the parent, for instance, who takes the trouble to understand what he is about in educating his child, deserves, and assuredly gets, support from above; and that Rebecca, let us say, had no right to bring up her son to be ‘thou worm, Jacob,’ in the trust that Divine grace would, speaking reverently, pull him through. Being a pious man, the son of pious parents, he was pulled through, but his days, he complains at the end, were ‘few and evil.’”*

*(HE pg. 104)*

The following is a sample outline of the virtues and vices parents would do well to instruct their children in.

*List of reference for training in habits of virtue:*

**Cleanliness & Neatness**

Body, hands, face, nails, hair, etc.  
Clothing, shoes, rubbers, cps, etc.  
Books, slates, desks, pen, pencil, etc.  
Everything used or done.

**Politeness**

At home  
At the table  
To guests or visitors  
On the street.  
In company

**Gentleness**

In speech  
In manner  
Avoid rude and boisterous conduct  
Patience, when misjudged  
Docility, when instructed.

**Kindness to Others**

To parents  
To brothers and sisters.  
To other members of family & friends  
To the aged and infirm  
To the unfortunate  
To the helpless and needy

**Love**

For God  
For parents  
For brothers and sisters  
For other members of family.  
For friends  
For teachers and benefactors  
For one's neighbor

**Truthfulness**

In words and actions  
Keeping one's word  
Distinction between a lie and untruth  
Prevarication and exaggeration  
Giving a wrong impression  
Telling falsehoods for fun

**Fidelity to Duty**

To parents—to assist, comfort, etc  
To brothers and sisters- older assist younger  
To the poor and unfortunate  
To the wrong and oppressed  
Duty to God

**Obedience**

To parents  
To teachers and others in authority  
To law  
To conscience  
To God

**Nobility**

Manliness  
Magnanimity & generosity  
Self-denial and self-sacrifice for others  
Bravery in helping or saving others  
Confession of injury done another

**Respect & Reverence**

For parents  
For teachers  
For the elderly  
For those in authority

**Gratitude & Thankfulness**

To parents  
To all benefactors  
To God, the Giver of all good

**Forgiveness**

Of those who confess their fault.  
Of those who have wronged us.  
Of our enemies  
Generosity in dealing with faults of others

**Nature/Attitude**

Prompt  
Cheerful  
Implicit  
Faithful

**Courage**

True courage-daring to do and defend right  
Bearing unjust censure or unpopularity  
In danger of misfortune  
Heroism

**Honor**

Act to be worthy of honor (but don't seek it)  
To honor one's family  
To honor one's friends  
To honor one's home  
To honor one's country

**Honesty**

In keeping one's word  
In little things  
Cheating, ignoble & base  
"Honesty is best policy"  
Confession of wrongs done to others  
Frankness & candor

**Humility**

True greatness-not blind to one's own faults  
Modesty  
Avoidance of pride and vanity  
Self-conceit-a sign of self-deception  
True humility, not servility or time serving

**Self-Respect**

Not self-conceit but conscious moral worth  
Not self-admiration  
Resulting in personal dignity  
Distinction between self-love and selfishness

**Prudence**

In speech and action  
When one may be misunderstood  
Respect for the opinions of others  
"Judge not, that ye be not judged"

**Health**

Duty to preserve healthy  
Habits that impair health-foolish and sinful  
An observance of the laws of health, a duty

**Good Manners**

At home  
In company  
In public assemblies  
Salutations on the street  
Politeness to strangers

**Good Name**

Gaining a good name when young  
Keeping a good name  
Keeping good company  
Reputation and character

**Temperance**

Moderation in the indulgence of appetite in things not harmful  
Total abstinence from that which is injurious  
Dangers of the use of alcohol  
Injurious effects of tobacco

**Evil Habits**

Those that injure health  
That destroy reputation  
That dishonor one's self and family  
That waste money  
That take away self-control  
That incur needless risks, as gambling  
That are offensive to others

**Evil Speaking**

Slander a serious offense  
Tale bearing to injure another  
Repeating evil which one has heard  
"Thou shalt not bear false witness"

**Bad Language**

Profanity, foolish and wicked  
Obscenity, base and offensive  
Defiling books or other things with obscene words and characters  
The use of slang, vulgar and impolite

**Industry**

Labor a duty and a privilege  
Right use of time  
Manual labor honorable  
Self-support gives independence  
Avoidance of unnecessary debt

**Patriotism**

Love of country  
Reverence for its flag  
Respect for its rulers  
Its defense when necessary  
Regard for its honor and good name

**Economy**

Saving in early life means competency/comfort in old age  
Duty to save part of one's earnings  
Duty to support Church  
Extravagance is wrong  
Charity

**Civil Duties**

Obedience to law  
Fidelity in office  
Honor in taking an oath  
Duty involved in voting  
Dignity and honor of citizenship

**Suggestions for implementing the outline:** Each week select one of the virtue topics for discussion. Ask the child to be looking for the virtue in the material they are reading that week. Look for news clippings and short stories that pertain to the subject. Allow the child freedom in asking questions, and make it a point to answer as simply and clearly as possible. Endeavor to have the child cull examples from the life of Christ, His Blessed Mother, the Saints, or some well-known characters of our own country. After the initial discussion about the virtue, frequently discuss it with the child throughout the week, commenting when they practice it and encouraging them when they don't. Some virtues will need to be focused on for longer than one week. Older children often benefit from gentle reminders during the day and an examine at noon and in the evening.

*Caution: Never allow the use of the name of anyone in the family or community as an example of a vice or a virtue.*

## *Quotes for Copywork, Dictation & Memorization*

“Virtue demands courage, constant effort, and, above all, help from on high.”

—St. John Vianney

“No voice can sing, nor heart can frame, nor can the mem’ry find, A sweeter sound than Thy blest name, O Savior of mankind.”

—St. Bernard of Clairvaux

“God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.”

—St. Augustine of Hippo

“Do not worry over things that generate preoccupation, derangement and anxiety. One thing only is necessary: to lift up your spirit and love God.”

—St. Padre Pio

“Heaven is at present out of sight, but in due time, as snow melts and discovers what it lay upon, so will this visible creation fade away before those greater splendors which are behind it.”

—Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman

“It is no great thing to be humble when you are brought low; but to be humble when you are praised is a great and rare attainment.”

—St. Bernard

“Look for Christ Our Lord in everyone and you will then have respect and reverence for all.”

—St. Teresa of Avila

“You cannot be half a saint. You must be a whole saint or no saint at all.”

—St. Thérèse of Lisieux

“Nothing seems tiresome or painful when you are working for a Master who pays well; who rewards even a cup of cold water given for love of Him.”

—St. Dominic Savio

“Let the mouth also fast from disgraceful speeches and railings. For what does it profit if we abstain from fish and fowl and yet bite and devour our brothers and sisters? The evil speaker eats the flesh of his brother and bites the body of his neighbor.”

—St. John Chrysostom

“Let everyone who has the grace of intelligence fear that, because of it, he will be judged more heavily if he is negligent. Let him who has no intelligence or talent rejoice and do as much as he can with the little that he has; for he has been freed from many occasions of sin.”

—St. Bridget of Sweden

“Holy Spirit, Spirit of truth, You are the reward of the saints, the Comforter of souls, Light in darkness, Riches to the poor, Treasure to lovers, Food for the hungry, Comfort to those who are wandering; to sum up, You are the One in whom all treasures are contained.”

—St. Mary Magdalene de’Pazzi

“If the fact that God sees us were fully impressed on our consciences, and if we realized that all our work, absolutely all of it, is done in His presence—for nothing escapes His eyes—how carefully we would finish things and how differently we would react!”

—St. Josemaria Escriva

“Store up in your minds the Lord’s words that you receive through your ears, for the Word of the Lord is nourishment of the mind. When His Word is heard but not stored away in the memory, it is like food that has been eaten and then rejected by an upset stomach. A man’s life is despaired of if he cannot retain his food; in the same way, if you receive the food of holy exhortations, but fail to store in your memory those words of life that nurture righteousness, you have good reason to fear the danger of everlasting death.”

—Pope St. Gregory the Great

“There is nothing we can offer to God more precious than good will. But what is good will? To have good will is to experience concern for someone else's adversities as if they were our own, to give thanks for our neighbor's prosperity as for our own; to believe that another person's loss is our own, and also that another's gain is ours; to love a friend in God, and bear with an enemy out of love, to do to no one what we do not want to suffer ourselves, and to refuse to no one what we rightly want for ourselves; to choose to help a neighbor who is in need not only to the whole extent of our ability, but even beyond our means. What offering is richer, what offering is more substantial than this one? What we are offering to God on the altar of our hearts is the sacrifice of ourselves.”

—St. Gregory the Great



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