

THE KINDERGARTEN POSSIBLE TO EVERY HOME AND VILLAGE

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IN FIVE ARTICLES, OF WHICH THIS IS THE SECOND: THE KINDERGARTEN GIFTS

THERE is, perhaps, no educational opinion which is more firmly fixed in the popular mind than that the earlier a child is taught to read the more it will rebound to his present good and to his future welfare; and there is certainly no other belief of its size and enduring quality which is, on the whole, more pernicious.

It is passing away, no doubt, especially among thinking people, but not so fast that it does not still form a stumbling-block in the path of the much-enduring kindergartner. We are credibly informed that many of our New England progenitors at the beginning of this century could read the Bible with comparative fluency at three years of age, but although properly astonished at the impressive fact we cannot help feeling that we should probably have been able to carry on the study of the good Book a little later if our ancestors had not begun with it so early, and we question whether the brain force of the children might not have been better able to cope with the tasks of to-day if their fathers and mothers had studied things more, and words less, in their younger days.

Children Must Learn the Alphabet of Things

FROEBEL said, and many great teachers before and after him have expressed the same thought, that the A B C of things must precede the A B C of words, and give to the words their true foundations—that is, we must know the alphabet of things, so that we can begin to spell out the world a little, before we are set to learn book lessons.

There is little that is valuable or life-giving in the ordinary primer and first reader, and the child can very well afford to defer the dramatic interest of the tales of the cat, the mat and the rat, the fan, the pan and the man until a time when he can pass over them more quickly, regarding them not as ends in themselves but as stepping stones to something better. The first six years of life are all too short for what is to be learned in them outside of the domain of book-knowledge, and upon the depth, the strength, the extent and the wholesomeness of these early impressions depend the depth, the strength, the extent and the wholesomeness of later knowledge and being.

Froebel believed that the child should be taught the full use of the members of his body and of his senses, that his faculty of speech should be trained, the powers of his mind and heart somewhat developed by the study of the things about him and their relations to himself, before he was introduced to the conventional learning of the schools—that is, to dealing with signs and symbols for things instead of the things themselves. He therefore worked out a connected series of objects which we call the gifts—legacies he willed to the children of mankind, which it was his belief would, if properly used, lay the foundation for abstract knowledge.

How the Child is Taught to Use the Gifts

WHAT clear conceptions must the child have before he can understand even so simple a thing as a rubber ball: what do his actions from the time he is able to "take notice" show that he is trying to find out?

First, such large general facts as form, color, motion, size, material, direction, position, and, a little later perhaps, number, weight, dimension and divisibility. He would doubtless discover all these things eventually if left to himself and given full liberty to experiment, but the objects called the kindergarten gifts give him the required knowledge in less time and in an orderly manner. They begin with solids, represented first by woolen balls, then wooden balls, cubes and cylinders and larger wooden cubes divided in various ways; next progress to surfaces, or thin tablets of wood or pasteboard of various shapes; then to lines, straight and curved, shown by sticks of different lengths and metal rings, and end in points, which may be pebbles, shells, or such seeds as beans, lentils, coffee berries or corn. The materials of the gifts are all simple enough, but the idea at the foundation is masterly; for you will see, if you examine the series, that it is so arranged as to give the child all the conceptions needed for understanding the objects of the world about him. Not only this, but they are all connected one with the other; there is an orderly progression in them, which begets in the mind a habit of seeing things in their right relations and interdependent, as they are in life.

Editor's Note—The second of a series of papers on "The Kindergarten," which began in the November issue of the Journal. The third article, which will appear in the next (the January) issue, will tell of "The Kindergarten Occupations."

The Gifts Appeal at Once to the Child

THEY would appeal at once to any child who saw them laid out upon a table as being most appropriate and delightful playthings; they would so appeal to most adults, probably, and grown-up fingers would stretch out instinctively to the bright colors, the smooth surfaces, the shining steel, the deftly divided blocks, the fascinating bits of cardboard, the shapely geometric figures. "Why, this will bounce, and that will roll, and these will build houses, and these roofs, and these pillars," cries the child; "and here are pretty colors and shapes to make kaleidoscope figures, and here rings and bright sticks to lay pictures on the table!"

If we think only of the intellectual value of these gifts, we see that by the use of the first (six worsted balls) the pupil cannot help gaining an idea of color, form and material, and, by the various plays connected with it, motion, direction and position.

With the second (wooden sphere, cube and cylinder), form is even more strongly accentuated because of the contrasts shown; material is noticed, number introduced, and the reasons for rest as well as motion dwelt upon.

Next come the building gifts, third, fourth, fifth and sixth (wooden cubes of two sizes, cut in various ways), and here enter, of necessity, great varieties of form, size, dimension, relation, position, divisibility, and an extended knowledge of number, progressing as far as simple fractions.

The Child Soon Learns to Investigate

THE chief joy of these cubes to the child is the opportunity they afford him for investigation, for the satisfaction of his healthy desire to take things apart and put them together again. He can divide the blocks to his heart's content and find out how "the wheels go round," and he can build them up again into all sorts of forms, and thus gratify his imagination and his constructive instinct.

With the seventh gift the child begins to work with plane surfaces, using circular, square and triangular tablets of wood or pasteboard, both colored and uncolored. There is an unexampled opportunity here for gaining knowledge about plane geometry.

Then come straight lines (sticks of the eighth gift), curved lines (metal rings of the ninth), and the points of the tenth gift, gradually eliminating one dimension after another, or approximating thereto, putting off the body and rising into the spirit, as it were. During the entire time the child is using this connected series of objects he is encouraged to make something new with each one, something which shall be all his own, and this insistence upon invention is a distinctive feature of the kindergarten. The child is never to be content with the examination and study of his blocks, not even to be content with following the suggestions and directions which the kindergartner gives for building, but when this is over he is to make something himself, either a copy of an object connected with his daily life or a symmetrical figure that pleases his fancy. Man is only of value, says the kindergartner, as he is enabled to become a useful, productive member of society, and to that end his individuality and his power of self-expression must be fostered.

The Gift Plays Train the Faculties

ALL the gift plays, too, train the faculty of speech, for there is constant question and answer, comment and observation while using them. Pleasant incidents and stories are told also, and the child is encouraged to express his own ideas and fancies.

We are accustomed to say that the kindergarten is a school of the moralities, and no one can watch a group of children at work with the gifts without noting that the ordinary, humdrum but useful virtues of industry, economy, perseverance and carefulness are in close attendance upon each small worker, and that he cannot dispense with their aid. However skeptical one may be as to the value of these objects in general, he cannot fail to acknowledge their worth as a preparation for later school work, and practical, hard-headed persons, who are disposed to think there must be something wrong with the kindergarten because it is so agreeable to the child, are often converted when they are made to see how perfectly the form and number work prepare for geometry and arithmetic; how the training of the hand in the various employments makes writing a simple matter, and how the constant education of the eye in dealing with distances, spaces and lengths, judging and comparing differing lines, angles and designs, is an absolute preparation for learning to read. A great deal might be said as to the bearing of the gifts on more advanced studies, and of the special way in which they address the judgment.

The Motto of the Kindergarten Gifts

BUT one more word must be added on a supremely valuable feature of the gift exercises—the opportunity they offer for concerted action. "Each for all, and all for each," must continually be kept in mind if kindergarten work is really to develop the spiritual nature of the child.

The question is often asked whether these playthings may be used in the home, and which of them are best adapted to the purpose. To begin with, the first gift (worsted balls in six of the colors of the spectrum—red, yellow, blue, green, orange and violet) was intended by Froebel for nursery use, and he gives in the "Pedagogics of the Kindergarten" and in his "Letters" many wise and practical suggestions for dealing with it. There are many ball plays, too, outlined in the kindergarten guides, and any intelligent mother who has the true play spirit can adapt the exercises to her own conditions and her personal needs.

The Lessons in Form and Color

THE second gift (wooden sphere, cube and cylinder) requires somewhat more work and thought to make it useful and interesting, though all children are delighted with the plays which show the three forms whirling on their different axes, disclosing surprises in the shape of new geometric figures revolving within. Then there are the second gift beads—tiny wooden reproductions of the three type-forms (colored and uncolored)—which furnish delightful nursery occupations, assorting them according to form and color, stringing them on stout shoe-laces in various ways, and using them, with sticks thrust through their holes, for soldiers, and children, and fence-posts, and trees, and telegraph poles and what not.

For the building-blocks, the sticks, the rings and the points, tables are necessary, either marked off in inch squares, or covered with squared oilcloth, which may be bought at the kindergarten supply stores. The fifth, sixth and seventh gifts are much more difficult than the others, and contain such wonderful capabilities for building and advanced geometrical work that it would be best, perhaps, to leave them to the management of a trained kindergartner.

The Gifts Which May be Used at Home

THE cubes and bricks of the first two building gifts, the eighth, ninth and tenth gifts (sticks, rings and points) may very well be used at home in simple exercises, manifold suggestions for which may be found in all technical books on the kindergarten. All these objects are inexpensive. The balls may easily be made at home, a simple set being purchased to show the size and exact colors; the sphere, cube and cylinder may be turned out by any man who can use a lathe if the requisite dimensions are given, and even the cubes and bricks of the third and fourth gifts may be made by the father of the family if he is a good tool-worker. All these blocks must be thoroughly well made, however; the proportions must be perfect and the surfaces carefully finished or there will be great difficulty of balance and consequent distress when the children are using them. More than this, exactness and accuracy are insisted upon in every kindergarten exercise, and it would be impossible to require them of the pupils unless exact and accurate materials were furnished.

The results from the gift work will undoubtedly be much more satisfactory if it is conducted by a good kindergartner, but if the organization of a kindergarten is a matter which must be left until there is sufficient public interest to demand one, the children of the neighborhood need not therefore be deprived of all the advantages which come from this cunningly devised series of objects.

The members of the Study Club must take up the gifts and give them serious and thoughtful attention; each little object, no matter how trifling it may seem, must be considered not only in itself but in its relations to what has preceded and what will follow it; there must be clear understanding of its special uses and of its worth to the child or little good can come of its employment.

Introduce the Gifts Step by Step

FINALLY, if the gifts are employed in the nursery, see to it that they are introduced consecutively, step by step, never taking up a new object until a fair knowledge of the last one has been gained, and then using the two together for a season; see to it that each day's play has a purpose behind it, and is not aimless trifling; reserve a special time for using the playthings, and, lest too great familiarity breed contempt, have them put away carefully when the period has expired; insist, also, that the building-blocks be put together into their original form before the box is turned over them, and the balls, beads, sticks and rings laid neatly in their trays or baskets.

These are the minor things to remember, if anything may be counted minor in these matters, and the major are that the gifts shall be so used that not only the physical powers may be developed and the mental faculties trained, but the spiritual nature addressed and the whole human creature given a little upward impetus toward "whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report."