

HOME AND SOCIETY.

Children's Logic.

CHILDREN have a power of assimilation which is simply marvelous. The mental processes of a young child go on as unconsciously and as silently as the physical; they seem as commonplace in the one case as they do in the other, and they are alike miraculous in both. Just try to get far enough away from the familiar facts to see their full significance. Think out carefully, one by one, all the mental processes by which a baby learns to talk. It is not difficult to see how they acquire the names of concrete things, that is so easy of ocular demonstration. The verbs can sometimes be explained by illustrating processes; an adjective here and there, with an occasional adverb, may be taught through the medium of the senses; but all the rest, the vast majority of the words of the language, as well as the construction of sentences, can be mastered only by some sort of a reasoning process. The words that can be taught by example are only a few loose fragments, which become language only when they are shaped and cemented together by the myriad minor words that limit, modify, and show relation—the articles, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

When one comes to consider how early a little child learns the exact meanings of prepositions,—for instance, how seldom they misunderstand the relations expressed by the very words that we find it difficult to define accurately,—it is indeed a cause for wonder. This is not a mere parrot-like repetition of a lesson, as any one who has ever closely observed a child learning to speak knows. There is in the process an exercise of severe logic that puts to shame the erratic inflections of our language. Children, for example, show a universal disposition to compare adjectives and adverbs, as well as to conjugate verbs, regularly. Before a child says, "I am gooder than I was, mamma," he has observed the ordinary form of the comparative, he has generalized his observation, and applied his generalization to a new word. This may be done unconsciously—it almost certainly is so done; but the result in either case is reached after the manner of a rational being—by processes of pure reasoning, and not through mere parrot-like imitation. And this reasoning is the work of a mind in the earliest stages of its development—perhaps by a baby not two years old. Indeed, the jumble that children make of their talk is often the result of an attempt to throw reason overboard and to conform to the "idiotisms" of the English language. The effect is sometimes too much for them, and they struggle along in the profoundest absurdities. One of my own children, when she was under three years of age, was taken to the photographer's. She heard us say, on looking at the negative that she had moved, and piped up, "Mamma, if you want me to sit a little more stiller, I will try a little more harder, but I *did* try next to the hardest."

Too often the logical faculty in children is smothered to death; they are born with latent reasoning powers, that follow the observing powers naturally in the course of development, if they are not destroyed. Too often the whole training of the nursery and the school is directed toward eliminating the reasoning powers and making of children mere monkeys or mere parrots. They ought of course to be set right when they are wrong, but such an evidence of the exercise of reason as I have just been speaking of, in the regular conjugation of verbs or comparison of adjectives, should neither be treated as the "cunning" ways of the baby and encouraged, nor as the ignorance of the older child and unconditionally reprobated. Do not crush out the little tender bud of rational thought which is just pushing its way into the air and light, either in sport or in contempt. Do not try, on the other hand, to force it beyond its natural growth; just let the logical faculty develop in its own time, and in the natural way, watching it, guiding it, clipping it where it needs, but cherishing it as the quality which separates your child on the intellectual side from the brutes.

Many an intelligent child is left entirely to an ignorant nurse till he is five or six years old, for the satisfaction of his intellectual hunger. Every question is either censured ignorantly or is impatiently brushed aside as troublesome. The atmosphere he breathes is an atmosphere of vulgar ignorance or blind superstition. The lack of reasonableness in everything,—in the explanations of what he sees about him, in the adjustment of the difficulties that arise between himself and the other children, in the punishments that are meted out to him,—gradually undermines his sense of fitness, and justice, and right.

The school follows the nursery, and confirms to a certain extent the teaching he has been receiving. The poor little victim is taught his A B C, etc., with no explanation of difference between the name of the letters and their phonetic value.

The higher education is, of course, not open to these charges—but much force later on in life is expended in merely undoing the work of the earlier years. The kindergarten system, in so far as it takes children from under the tuition of ignorance and surrounds them with better influences, is certainly a gain upon the ordinary nursery; though I cannot believe that when God put the race into family groups he meant nothing by it but that these were to be broken up and the constituents reclassified. It seems to me that "mother" ought to mean more to children than it usually does; that she should be the present reigning power, no matter how much of the physical labor she may relegate to others; that she should create the moral and intellectual atmosphere which her children breathe, and should be the fountain of wisdom and justice, as well as of love and sympathy, to which they would naturally turn.