

WHY MY CHILDREN ARE HEALTHY.



“I THINK, mother,” said Jack, one fine spring morning, “you should go and see Mrs. Henderson. She is in great trouble with that delicate boy of hers. He has had another attack of inflammation of the lungs, and they have been watching the poor little

fellow for several days, fearing that he would die.”

“Most certainly I will,” I answered, “and I will see if I cannot help her. But, Jack, Mrs. Henderson goes the wrong way to work. That boy has not a chance of being anything but delicate.”

“You think his mother coddles him? I am rather afraid she does. But who can say? The child is delicate, and that being the case, they cannot treat him as if he were robust and healthy. Our children are naturally strong; let us be thankful for that. We cannot tell how we should have done if they had been weakly.”

“I know what I should have done if they had been *only* weakly, and not positively diseased. I should have seen that they were well clothed and well shod, that their little arms and legs and chests were thoroughly covered, that they were regularly bathed, and that they had plenty of plain, wholesome, nourishing food, and then I should have let them take their chance of the breezes blowing upon them. Indeed I should have let them brave the weather, and take regular exercise in the open air; and unless there were something radically wrong in their constitutions, they would not have been weakly long.”

“I think you are quite right,” said Jack. “If I were you I should go and see Mrs. Henderson, and advise her a little. Perhaps you may get her to see things differently.”

“More likely make her think that I am officious and interfering. Don’t you remember that woman in the railway carriage that old nurse told us of?”

“No; what about her?”

“The last time nurse went to Worcester there was a woman in the carriage with a very delicate-looking little baby, whom she was feeding with a red herring. Nurse watched her for a little while, till she could

bear it no longer; and then she said to her, as kindly as possible, ‘Do you think it is wise to let your baby eat that herring?’ The woman drew herself up, looked offended, and said, ‘Thank you, you need not teach me what I am to give my children. If I don’t know how to treat them, I ought to know. I’ve buried eight.’ An old gentleman in the corner, who was looking very indignantly at her, said, ‘I think, madam, if you go on as you are doing, you will be able to say in a short time that you have buried nine.’”

I found things with Mrs. Henderson just as I had expected. The child was recovering, but looked pale and feeble, and the mother was nearly as ill as he was with anxiety and watchfulness. She seemed truly grateful when I offered to sit with the child while she rested, but declined my help, and said she could not leave him to others. She begged me, however, to sit a little while with her, as she wanted to speak with me. This of course I gladly did.

“I cannot think how it is,” she said, “that our children are so delicate. I am sure it is not for want of care. We have had a very severe winter, it is true, but then they have not been out more than a dozen times, and then it was because the weather was a little milder than usual. I have been most careful not to let them go about the passages even, for fear of draughts. And yet I think they have good constitutions.”

“I cannot but think they would be better if you were less careful for them,” said I.

Mrs. Henderson looked slightly offended. “Do I understand,” she said, “that you are one of those who advise that children should be sent out in all weathers to make them hardy?”

“I am one of those who believe that children and grown-up people cannot possibly be healthy and robust unless they take a proper amount of exercise.”

“And by taking exercise you mean letting them go out in all weathers alike—fog and rain and snow, blazing heat and bitter easterly wind?”

“You are rather overstating the case,” I answered. “I would endeavour to avoid both coddling the children and exposing them unwisely. I would not send a child out when there was a bitter easterly wind, unless I was sure he was very strong, and could bear it. At the same time I would make an effort to send him out for a brisk walk for as many days during the year as I could.”

“How can children take regular open-air exercise in this dreadful climate?” said Mrs. Henderson.

“This climate is very much railed against, and with cause, but it possesses advantages. There are very few days, even during the severest winter, when a brisk walk is not a more enjoyable thing to a healthy person than sitting crouching over the fire would be. Of course the roads are dirty; thick boots are the remedy for that. The wind is bleak and piercing: health and warm clothing will make one almost

impervious to it. The muscles need to be developed, the nerves strengthened, the chest expanded. How can these ends be attained by those who sit in a warm room studying, writing, reading, and sewing all day long?"

"But surely you do not object to reading and study," said Mrs. Henderson. "I thought you were such an advocate of them."

"Indeed I do not. I consider a good education is of priceless value, and yet it is not so valuable that it is worth while to sacrifice health for it; and health cannot be enjoyed unless exercise is taken. I should be rather inclined to disagree with your definition of exercise, though."

"What was that?"

"You seemed to think that by exercise I meant only constitutionals to be taken in season and out of season."

"And what else do you mean by it?"

"I mean by exercise, the free, unrestrained use of every limb. If this can be done in the open air, so much the better; but if the weather is really so bad that a child cannot get out, he need not therefore be debarred from taking exercise. When my children were young, I have again and again put on their outdoor clothing, opened the nursery window wide, and let them hop, skip, and romp indoors to their heart's content."

"But you did not think that was as good as going out?"

"No, I did not; because I think that there is no exercise that can be compared with walking or running in the open air, and I am quite sure if it were practised regularly and constantly, there would not be so many delicate young people as there are. Only it ought not to be continued to produce excessive fatigue."

"Your plan, at any rate, would suit the children themselves. How difficult it is to keep them quiet!"

"Because it is not intended that they should be always kept still. It is an instinct, with a healthy child, to love play. Do you not remember what Dr. Chevasse says?—'I have seen silly parents trying to get their children to say that they liked school-time better than holiday-time; that they liked work better than play. I have seen with joy many little fellows repudiating the odious and unnatural sentiment, and declaring manfully that they preferred cricket to Ovid. And if any boy ever tells you that he would rather learn his lessons than go into the playground, beware of that boy. Either his health is drooping, and he is becoming prematurely and unnaturally developed, or he is a little humbug. He is an impostor. He is seeking to obtain credit under false pretences. Depend upon it, unless it really be that he is a poor, spiritless little man, deficient in nerve and muscles, and unhealthily precocious in intellect, he has in him the elements of a sneak; and he wants nothing but time to ripen him into a pickpocket or a swindler.'"

"But that is *play*; you would scarcely call play, *exercise*."

"Indeed I should, and very good exercise too, if it only brings all the limbs into use. There are several games which are most beneficial when played in moderation—such as throwing and catching a ball, trundling a hoop, playing at battledore and shuttlecock, or at horses, chevy chase, football, rowing, cricket."

"No, no," said Mrs. Henderson, "there you must draw the line. I know of one or two instances in which playing at cricket and rowing, practised by the young, have done incalculable mischief, and have laid the foundation of chronic ill-health in after-life. How can it be good for boys and young men to stand out in the blazing heat, as they do in cricket, until they are completely exhausted, to say nothing of their standing the chance of having their teeth knocked down their throats, and even of worse accidents than that happening to them?"

"Ah! you are condemning, and quite rightly, the abuse of the game. I am praising its use. In games, as in everything else, common-sense ought to be the guide. Skipping, too, is most excellent, when the arms are thrown backwards instead of forwards, and when it is not kept up long enough to produce fatigue. The best of skipping and of skating is that girls can take part in them, and they are far more limited than boys in their choice of active exercises. They can practise rowing, it is true, and singing is always open to them."

"Should you call singing, exercise?" said Mrs. Henderson, in a surprised tone.

"I should call it exercise of the lungs only, of course; and I would not have any one sing who was afflicted with disease of the chest. But when this is absent, singing is a most healthful occupation. You very seldom, indeed, hear of public singers who die of consumption."

"I suppose not," said my friend thoughtfully. "Well, I must say that your range of activities is sufficiently elastic to render it possible for almost every one to take exercise in some shape or other. I can quite believe, too, that regular exercise must be salutary for the weakly as well as for the strong, and when once I get this dear child well, I will try your plan. Certainly I have not found my own answer very well."

"But remember," I interrupted, "that great judgment is called for in dealing with weakly persons, and avoid rashness as much as you would over-care. To my mind, if a healthy child is well clothed and well fed, he can brave almost any weather; but one who has a tendency to inflammation of the lungs should be guarded from north-easterly winds. Also, no child, however strong, should be allowed to run about directly after a hearty meal, nor should he take a long walk or engage in any active work on an empty stomach, especially the first thing in the morning."

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