

Charlotte Mason was a British educator who lived in the late 1800s and early 1900s. English children in the 1800s were educated according to social class; the poorer were taught a trade, and the fine arts and literature were reserved for the richer class. Charlotte envisioned a generous and broad curriculum for all children, regardless of social class. She believed that “every child has a right of entry to several fields of knowledge, every normal child has an appetite for such knowledge and this appetite or desire for knowledge is a sufficient stimulus for schoolwork, if the knowledge be fitly given.”

She stated that children often have this appetite schooled out of them due to the uses of: too many oral lessons which offer knowledge in a diluted form; lectures, for which the teacher collects, arranges and illustrates matter from various sources; the text book, compressed and re-compressed from the big book of the big man; and the use of emulation and ambition as the sole incentives to learning in place of the adequate desire for, and delight in, knowledge.



Her method centered around the idea that Education is: an Atmosphere, a Discipline, a Life, and the Science of Relations. By “atmosphere,” Charlotte spoke of the environment our children grow up in. She knew that the ideas that rule our lives, as parents and teachers, will have a profound impact on our children. “The child breathes the atmosphere emanating from his parents; that of the ideas which rule their own lives.”

By “discipline,” Charlotte emphasized the importance of training children in good habits of mind, body, and spirit. In fact, she likened good habits to railroad tracks that parents and teachers lay down and upon which the child may travel with ease into his adult life.

By “life,” Charlotte wanted to remind us that “all the thought we offer to our children shall be living thought; no mere dry summaries of facts will do.”

By “Science of Relations,” Charlotte explained that children “should be brought up to have relations of force with earth and water, should run and ride, swim and skate, lift and carry; should know texture, and work in material; should know by name, and where, and how, they live at any rate, the things of the earth about him, its birds and beasts and creeping things, its herbs and trees; should be in touch with the literature, art and thought of the past. I do not mean that he should know all these things; but he should feel...the thrill, not from mere contiguity, but because he has with the past the relationship of living pulsing thought... He must have a living relationship with the present, its historic movement, its science, literature, art, social needs and aspirations. In fact, he must have a wide outlook, intimate relations all round; and force, virtue, must pass out of him, whether of hand, will, or sympathy, wherever he touches.”

Charlotte’s students used living books rather than dry textbooks. She taught spelling by using passages from great books that communicate great ideas rather than just a list of words. She encouraged spending time outdoors, interacting with God’s creation firsthand and learning the living ways of nature. Charlotte emphasized treating each child as a person, not as a container into which you dump information. She believed that all children should receive a broad education, which she likened to spreading a feast of great ideas before them. “Children are most fitly educated on *things* (such as natural obstacles for physical contention, as in climbing, swimming and walking; material to work in—wood, leather, clay, etc.; natural objects like birds, plants, streams or stones; objects of art; and scientific apparatus) and *books*. We contend that by this means the mechanical difficulties of education—reading, spelling, composition, etc., disappear, and studies prove themselves to be “for delight, for ornament, and for ability.”