

JOURNAL  
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Sept. 8, 1881.

CHILD-LIFE.

The Social Science Association is now making, through its educational department, investigation into the physical and mental development of infants. In connection with the discussion of this subject, the following letter of Professor Darwin, of England, will be read with interest:

DOWN, BECKENHAM, KENT,  
RAILWAY STATION, ORPINGTON, S. E. R., }  
July 19, 1881.

*Dear Madam:*—In response to your wish, I have much pleasure in expressing the interest which I feel in your proposed investigation on the mental and bodily development of infants. Very little is at present accurately known on this subject, and I believe that isolated observations will add but little to our knowledge; whereas tabulated results from a very large number of observations, systematically made, would probably throw much light on the sequence and period of development of the several faculties.

This knowledge would probably give a foundation for some improvement in our education of young children, and would show us whether the same system ought to be followed in all cases.

I will venture to specify a few points of inquiry which, as it seems to me, possess some scientific interest. For instance, does the education of the parents influence the mental powers of their children at any age, either at a very early or somewhat more advanced stage? This could perhaps be learned by schoolmasters or mistresses, if a large number of children were first classed according to age and their mental attainments, and afterwards in accordance with the education of their parents, as far as this could be discovered.

As observation is one of the earliest faculties developed in young children, and as this power would probably be exercised in an equal degree by the children of educated and uneducated persons, it seems not impossible that any transmitted effect from education could be displayed only at a somewhat advanced age. It would be desirable to test statistically in a similar manner the truth of the often-repeated statement that colored children at first learn as quickly as white children, but that they afterwards fall off in progress. If it could be proved that education acts not only on the individual, but by transmission, on the race, this would be a great encouragement to all working on this all-important subject.

It is well known that children sometimes exhibit at a very early age strong special tastes, for which no cause can be assigned, although occasionally they may be accounted for by reversion to the taste or occupation of some progenitor; and it would be interesting to learn how far such early tastes are persistent, and influence the future career of the individual. In some instances such tastes die away without apparently leaving any after-effect; but it would be desirable to know how far this is commonly the case, as we should then know whether it were important to direct, as far as this is possible, the early tastes of our children. It may be more beneficial that a child should follow energetically some pursuit, of however trifling a nature, and thus acquire perseverance, than that he should be turned from it, because of no future advantage to him. I will mention one other small point of inquiry in relation to very young children, which may possibly prove important with respect to the origin of language; but it could be investigated only by persons possessing an accurate musical ear. Children, even before they can articulate, express some of their feelings and desires by noises uttered in different notes. For instance, they make an interrogative noise, and others of assent and dissent in different tones; and it would, I think, be worth while to ascertain whether there is any uniformity in different children in the pitch of their voices under various frames of mind.

I fear that this letter can be of no use to you, but it will serve to show my sympathy and good wishes in your researches.

I beg leave to remain, dear madam, yours faithfully,  
CHARLES DARWIN.

To Mrs. Emily Talbot, Boston, Mass.

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The Social Science Association is now making through its educational department, investigation into the physical and mental development of infants. In connection with the discussion of this subject, the following letter of Professor Darwin, of England, will be read with interest:

Darwin, BUCKINGHAM, ENGLAND.  
RAILWAY STATION, GARRISON, N. H., U. S. A.  
July 18, 1881.

Dear Madam:—In response to your wish, I have pleasure in expressing the interest which I feel in your present investigation on the mental and bodily development of infants. Very little is at present accurately known on this subject, and I believe that historical observations will add but little to our knowledge. Whomsoever laboured under a very large number of observations, systematically made, would probably throw much light on the sequence and period of development of the several faculties.

This knowledge would probably give a foundation for some improvement in our education of young children, and would show us whether the same system ought to be followed in all cases.

I will venture to specify a few points of inquiry which, as it seems to me, present most desirable issues. For instance, does the education of the parents influence the mental progress of their children at any age, either at a very early or some what more advanced stage? This would perhaps be learned by retrospective or historical, if a large number of children were first reared according to age and their mental state, and afterwards in accordance with the education of their parents, so far as this could be discovered.

An observation is one of the earliest faculties developed in young children, and as this power would probably be exercised in an equal degree by the children of educated and uneducated parents, it seems not impossible that any transmission after birth of education could be detected only at a somewhat advanced age. It would be desirable to test systematically a similar number the truth of the often-repeated statement that colored children at four years as quickly as white children, but that they afterwards fall off in progress. If it could be proved that education acts not only on the individual, but by transmission, on the race, this would be a great encouragement to all working on this important subject.

It is well known that children sometimes exhibit at a very early age strong special talents, for which no means can be assigned, although occasionally they may be accounted for by reference to the state or condition of some progenitor; and it would be interesting to learn how far such early instances are constant, and influence the future career of the individual. In some instances such talents die away without apparently leaving any after-effect; but it would be desirable to know how far this is commonly the case, as we should then know whether it were important to direct, so far as this is possible, the early career of our children. It may be more beneficial that a child should follow unperceptibly some parents, of however ordinary talents, and thus acquire perseverance, than that he should inherit from it, because of no future advantage to him.

I would like to see some other small point of inquiry in relation to very young children, which may possibly prove important and be open to the origin of language; but it would be best to confine only by present promising an elaborate treatise on children, even before I can articulate, express some of my thoughts and desires by using instead in different words. For instance, they make an interesting noise, and a noise of ascent and descent in different directions, and I would like to know, while in ascertaining whether there is any uniformity in different children in the pitch of their voices, what is the true source of sound.

I fear that this letter can hold no use to you, but it will serve to show my sympathy and good wishes in your researches.

I beg leave to remain, dear madam, yours faithfully,  
CHARLES DARWIN.

To Mrs. Emily Talbot, Boston, Mass.