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EC5501 Why Mothers Grow Gray

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WHY MOTHERS GROW GRAY

By Mrs. Eva Morse

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You recognize the title as taken from the cartoon that appears in our daily papers. The scene is laid in a modest home where mother does the work with some interference or some help, as the case may be, from two early adolescent children. One cartoon that I recall pictures the boy sitting on his sister's coat while she struggles vainly to pull it out from under him.

The implication in the title is that the behavior of children in their teens or near teens is so trying that mothers are reduced to such a state of anxiety and despair that their hair turns prematurely gray.

As we look at these pictures we are impressed by the fact that the mother seems to be making a contribution to the disorder. She is shocked speechless or she is angered to retaliation or she is moved to violent fault finding.

I have an idea that if we talked to that mother she would confess that she was at the end of her resources, that she didn't know what to do with them. She would explain that she had told them to behave; that she had punished them in every way she could think of but it didn't seem to do any good and that she was just about exhausted with the struggle. Quite likely she would add that she hoped she could live until they were old enough to have some sense.

This mother is an every day character. We not only meet her frequently but we often take the part. She does not see that the pivot of the whole situation is herself. She is never quiet, never understanding, never adult. She is quite as much responsible as the children, for the disorder. What she is unconsciously doing is to make bad conduct interesting. For instance, if those children always get more attention when they are disorderly than they do when they are orderly, they are going to continue to act that way.

I was watching a young mother dress a youngster. Just as she was ready to slip the garment over the child's head he ran away. If she had run after him laughing and calling him a darling little rogue, what would have happened? He would have continued to do it because it was an interesting game - but she did not, she merely stood still with the garment in her hands, and an expression on her face that said, "We don't play this way". Observing that she did not follow him, he came back. She understood the influence on the child of her own reactions.

We have a right to conclude that the reason some mothers grow gray is because they do not understand the psychology of youth.

Activities of Children

The activity of children often annoys the adult because he does not know that it is a necessary condition for development. The human being does not develop standing still as a plant does. To grow he must satisfy an urge that drives him to investigate, to experience. This child comes into an utterly strange world that

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must be understood; he starts with a helpless body that must be developed. This is his big task. He knows what to do. He must be active, he waves his arms, he kicks, he uses his voice.

We must not say how can we keep him quiet but how can we give him opportunity.

We know that human beings are happiest when they are busy. We all recognize the fact that the human being needs to be busy. That even our leisure time can not be a time of doing nothing. The severest, the cruelest punishment that can be meted out to a person is to deprive him of activity.

We appreciate this in dealing with our children. But we sometimes are like the man who had six boys. He knew that for his own peace of mind they had to be busy but he did not appreciate the fact that there was some choice in the kind of business they had. He kept them working all the time. All vacation they worked regular hours. During the school year they had to work after school hours. Then if there was any time left they did their school work. At one time he had nothing else in mind he wanted them to do, so he sent them into the field to cut grain by hand altho he knew the threshing crew was to be at his place in the afternoon. The boys could not help knowing that he was merely doing it to keep them busy and that it was no help. It was like setting them to piling up a cord of wood and then making them unpile it so they could pile it again. This kind of activity merely antagonized them.

Help Carry the Family Load

It is right for children to help carry the family load but there is an urge in them that is quite as important to their spiritual growth as thirst is for their physical - an urge to do something creative - that is, an urge to plan - to execute the plan - to test the thing after it is done. It is quite important that the child learn to put away his toys but after he has learned to do it there is nothing creative about the task. It does not answer this deep seated hunger to express. But the child who is sitting at the edge of a sand pile with a basin of water, who moistens the sand slightly and mounds it over his bare foot and sits patiently waiting until the sand has taken shape and then carefully draws his foot out of the pile and leaves a hole, which is a barn; who then breaks up little sticks and makes a fence and picks up pebbles and calls some of them sheep, some horses, and some cows; who plants trees and lays out roads, this child is doing a creative thing - something that satisfies his soul and makes him happier and healthier.

It is all right for the adolescent to assist with the chores. He should help carry the family load. But he is not finding expression in that job. But if he has found a place on the creek where he can build a dam and control the water so it turns a little wheel, he is doing something creative that helps him to self-control growth and happiness. This is no idle fancy. It is the way of growth and it is just as necessary to all around happy development as dry feet are to the little chicken. Parents who see this need for expression do not grow gray in raising their children.

Telling is Not Teaching

Even when we recognize the needs of the child we do not always guide him wisely because we do not know that telling is not teaching and that he does not learn thru our doing.

Someone has said that the child is egocentric (that is, devoted to himself) for the first seven or eight years, in order to protect himself from his parents. The parent so often wants to make a plaything of him that he would be made dependent if he did not protect himself. The wise course to pursue is to see that he is physically cared for, clean, quiet, and well nourished, that he lives under a regular regime and that he is surrounded by a life that calms while it offers opportunities for development, and then let him alone.

As soon as he is old enough to get into things (which is his way of adjusting to the unknown) we nag instead of teach.

We should recognize that curiosity is as much a necessary part of his make-up as breathing. He needs an environment where dangers are eliminated as far as possible but where he has opportunity to handle, feel, push, reach for, and learn about material and space. If there are things he must leave alone we must teach him and not just tell. The mother who says "I have told you fifty times not to do that" is merely revealing her own inefficiency. Telling is not teaching. We talk, talk, talk and it has no effect except that it becomes an annoyance or an opiate.

When we have something to tell a small child we must make sure he gets it. First, we must have his attention. We get that best by putting ourselves on his level and talking to him face to face. Then we must be sure that it is something he can understand and that it is within the range of his capacity and interest. Talking at a child's head without knowing whether he is getting it or not is a good way to develop habits of inattention and indifference.

After we get the child's attention we must teach him what we want him to do and make the opportunity for him to do it.

I think one of the most pernicious habits we can indulge in is for the parent to start moralizing and fault finding in the morning when the child is getting ready for school. The teacher can invariably tell what kind of home leaving the child experienced. This not only applies to the child but to the adult as well. Again and again when a workman is found careless on the job he confesses that he had words with his wife before he left home. It may have been his fault. I don't know but the facts are that if you want to have your family do its best during the day, it is up to you to see that there is no reminding of unpleasant things or fault finding in the morning.

Too many of us teach as the little boy taught his parrot. His mother came into the room and was horrified to hear him swear. She protested, but he justified himself by saying he was teaching the parrot what he must not say.

Our mastery of mathematics would be slow if we studied 2×2 does not make 5, 2×2 does not make 6. Yet that is the way we try to teach our children. We hold up to them the things they should not do. When we teach we get understanding and activity from the one taught.

Help Child to Feel Secure

These young people need to feel secure. In these days of uncertainty we are likely to let our worries dominate our living. We often think that children are so carefree they do not notice what is troubling their elders. This is not the case. They do not have the experience to evaluate the things that are happening

so they are nagged by them in quite needless ways. Looking back into your own youth, do you not recall times when you were filled with a vague anxiety and even terror about some situation that could quite easily be explained by the older people in the household, if you had confided in them.

A good illustration of that is the story of the little boy whose playful uncle told him he would grow horns on his head if he ate molasses on his bread. One day he felt a bump on his head and he asked his mother to feel and see if he was growing a horn. She was busy and she absent mindedly ran her hand over his head and said she could feel a horn there all right. He worried and worried, how could he wear a hat? How could he go to school? Everyone would laugh at him. He got into such a state that he couldn't sleep. Upon investigation his mother found out what the trouble was and set his fears at rest. At these times when we are all so hard hit, we need to be careful to keep such an atmosphere in the household that the children are not unduly worried.

I talked with a young woman out in the state a few months ago. She said they had lost part of their farm on a mortgage - they had hung up their Ford because they couldn't afford to run it. The truck picked up their milk and they had nothing else to sell but eggs. They were only three miles from town and she and her husband each made a trip a week with a basket of eggs. She said, "You know principally we bring back library books. We have enough to eat but of course we have no clothes. If this keeps up the country is going to be filled with fat, naked farmers. But we are doing so many things together. We take the three children out with us and we clear off places that need picking up. We are starting a little rustic house that we can train vines over. I canned lots of tomatoes last year so the children can have that and as long as I can get the cod liver oil for them I am not going to let anything worry me."

She has learned one of the most important precepts of mental hygiene: To live fully but one day at a time. William Osler, one of the greatest of medical men, said that whatever success he had made was because he had learned to plan carefully - then cease to think of the plan but to live richly and fully one day at a time. We do not help tomorrow by worrying about it. But if we put the best we have into joyous living today, tomorrow will be the easier. If we can keep such an atmosphere in the home our children will not be robbed of their right to serene living.

Parents may keep from becoming prematurely gray.

- (a) By making it their business to understand the needs of the children and then learn to guide them instead of trying to thwart them.
- (b) By observing themselves so they learn that the parental reaction is the biggest part of a behavior problem.
- (c) By learning that children can not live happily nor develop normally without something to do but that much of it should be of their own choosing and that they should plan and execute this work of their choice.
- (d) By appreciating that children should be raised in brightness and light and we should not burden them with our troubles. That the sanest, most wholesome way to live is to plan carefully - then to live joyfully just one day at a time.