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Physical Education in Elementary Schools—
a Part of the School Hygiene.

BY

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Attention has been drawn lately to the Physical Education in the School and much has been said and written on the subject. Medical men and the general public began to take it up; Schoolmen, often representing any reform in the standing regime of the School, have followed; and at the present day, there is scarcely any other subject which is so conspicuously brought forward, as just this. At the same time, I venture to say, there is scarcely any that is less satisfactorily treated. Once a cry raised: "exercise for the children," any kind of exercise seems to be considered sufficient, the efficacy of such exercise not being taken into account at all. That such a view is not justified by facts, must be apparent to everyone, who has studied the Physiology of bodily exercises.

In offering a few brief remarks upon the Physical Education in the English Schools, it is necessary to point out the great difference that exists between the various Educational Institutions of the Country.

In the Universities and the large Public Schools the Physical Education of the Students takes a *prominent* place. Well-fitted Gymnasia, swimming baths, and large fields for the systematic practice of

sports and games afford opportunities for bodily exercises of which the Scholars avail themselves in the most spirited manner. No other country can be compared to England in this respect.

But in the Elementary Schools, to which I will confine myself, the case is quite different. These Schools, frequented by the children of the middle and lower classes and from which consequently, the rank and file of the citizens has to be recruited, leave a great deal to be desired, possibly also in other respects, but particularly in what concerns the Physical Education of the child. In them must, for obvious reasons, regulated Physical Exercises—Educational Gymnastics—take the place of free games and sports.

Everybody who has studied child-life in its different phases, knows that there is one thing especially which strikes the observer, namely, the incessant and irrepressible want of movement that every healthy child exhibits. The cause for this is to be sought, *not* in the so-called unruly disposition of the child—a character often unjustly given to the most good-natured—but in the natural laws according to which the whole development of the child takes place. Physiology teaches us that muscular exercise is simply necessary for the growth of the child; as necessary as food and air to attain the development, physical and mental, that Nature intended. Depriving the children of the opportunities for free movement is, therefore, a direct violation of Nature's laws and cannot be done without harm to their organisms.

When the child begins school its conditions of life are at once considerably altered. From freedom it is brought under restraint; from the perpetual

motion which its body requires, it is placed on the school-bench and told to "keep still!"—an order which, as every teacher knows, is obeyed with great difficulty. This alone would be sufficient to impede and prevent the natural growth and development of the child. But on the forms bad positions are often taken and sustained for some time by the pupils. The injurious effects of forced inactivity are thus aggravated, and the result is, too often, deformities of various kinds. Hence we see so many of the children afflicted with those so common ailments, popularly called the poking chin, the stooping shoulders, the flat and narrow chest, generally combined with spinal curvatures of one form or another. It is interesting to note how all these defects directly attack the chest, just the part of the body, which, containing organs of such vital importance as the heart and lungs, ought to be particularly protected.

If we consider the cause of all these deformities, the remedy will be found near at hand; for it only stands to reason that if muscular inactivity and bad positions *can* cause and *do* cause an evil, the contrary—Physical Exercises, consisting of rightly chosen movements, carefully executed in good positions—will, if used in time, counteract the bad influences and prevent the irregular development. And that such is the case has been abundantly proved by experience.

Therefore, although the studies in School force the children to muscular inactivity for a certain time—which cannot be prevented—we must by suitable exercises prevent them from suffering harm, physically; and it becomes an imperative duty in the management of the School to see that this is effectively done.

The time does not permit a description of the

exercises that should be used. But I will try briefly to point out the principal object to be kept in view.

The aim of Physical Education is a harmonious development of the body. Remembering the grave dangers we have just mentioned to the natural development of the child consequent upon school-life, it is clear that these must first of all be averted. The exercises must therefore in the first instance be *corrective*, that is to say, directed towards widening of the chest, straightening of the spine, a correct carriage of the head and shoulders. The greatest attention should be paid to their effect upon the respiratory and circulatory organs. To attain this, the muscles must be the *means*, not in themselves, the *end*; for a muscular development is not always a sign of bodily health. If attention be paid to such developments mainly, harm is often done to vital parts. It is well known, that heart and lung diseases are the professional ailments of acrobats and others who make violent gymnastics their aim in life.

A most important matter, although often neglected, is the *sequence* of movements in the lesson. When we reflect how every movement has its effect, local and general, upon the system, it is clear that the exercises must not follow each other anyhow, but with due regard paid to this effect. For instance, an exercise which has unduly increased the action of the heart and lungs must be followed by one which has a quieting influence upon the same organs.

It is often urged that the exercises should be made a recreation for the children. This is true enough, although not in the sense in which it is generally spoken. For by "recreative" is, more often than not, meant "amusing" exercises; and to provide amusement is not the aim of Physical Educa-

tion. But recreative in a higher sense of the word, bodily exercises, rightly executed, certainly are. For by muscular activity the blood is drawn from central to peripheral parts of the system. Congestions to the brain and pelvic organs—caused by intellectual work combined with long sitting still on the school-benches—are thus relieved; and a re-action takes place as beneficial to the mind as to the body.

Regarding the question of Physical Education from this *hygienic* point of view, there can scarcely be any doubt as to the place, that should be allotted to the subject in the ordinary school routine. It cannot very well be compared with the other subjects taught in School. Its aim and the object of its introduction in the school-work are different. Here the instruction does not mean preparing for an examination with questions and answers. It means rather the supplying of a want, the want of movement which Nature requires, for the healthy development of our children. What is the use of well-constructed forms and benches in the school, if the children are not able to carry their spines erect and avoid curvatures of various kinds? What is the use of airy, well-ventilated class-rooms, if the children have not got large enough lungs in their narrow chests to benefit by the fresh air? What is even the use of intellectual instruction, if the overtaxed brains of the children are not capable of digesting the mental food they get during school hours? Let, therefore, the Physical Education take its place amongst and complete the *hygienic* arrangements in the school. If looked upon as a part of the School Hygiene, much of the opposition and prejudices by which its progress is now hampered will vanish and many misunderstandings regarding the same will disappear.

To be of any use a proper amount of time must of course be given to the subject. That the lessons ought to be of daily occurrence is only natural, since the defects in School-life which they are intended to neutralize are always at hand. It is an important question in itself and worthy of earnest consideration. But less than half an hour each day cannot be proposed seriously, if the children are to derive real and lasting benefit from their work.

As already remarked the subject is not yet arranged on a satisfactory basis in the Elementary Schools. Military drill or Physical exercises are certainly taught in most of them, but the exercises lack strangely both in quantity and quality. In quantity, because the time allotted is insufficient; in quality, because the exercises are badly chosen. The reason for this is no doubt, that the subject has been, and is, looked down upon; time and thought are unwillingly bestowed upon it.

The standard of a subject may be judged from the standard of the teacher. The offices of school-keeper and drill-instructor are often combined.

The teachers—mostly excellent as instructors—lack, as a rule, the theoretical knowledge necessary to choose and combine the movements to the greatest benefit of the children. Exercises are copied either from the acrobat's tricks or from military gymnasia. The latter are by far the best, but the teachers—often late soldiers—ignore, that what is excellent for the development of muscle in a healthy, full-grown man, may be entirely unsatisfactory and even dangerous to a growing child.

In addition hereto comes the love for display, which has been carried to such an extent that often the real, hygienic and educational object of the

exercises is quite obscured. Movements are executed to music, and everything, form, and usefulness, is sacrificed to the time of the piano or the rhythm of the song, as the case may be.

It is evident from these few facts, that reforms are required. Neither are signs of improvement wanted. In many schools throughout the country, especially Girls' Schools, has Physical Education been introduced in a rational manner. The School Board for London has for several years back paid some attention to the subject and with good results.

In most cases these improvements are based upon the s.c. Swedish System of Gymnastics, a system as yet very imperfectly known here, but well worthy of a thorough study. On the Continent, attention is now directed towards this system of Physical Exercises and publications have appeared lately, which treat of this branch of education with special reference to its standing in Sweden; of these I take the liberty to mention two. One is a pamphlet by Dr. E. Meyer, printed in Doberan, 1889, and bearing the title, *Zur körperlichen Erziehung der Jugend*. The other is an article by Dr. Fernand Lagrange, well-known for his previous work on the Physiology of Bodily Exercises. It appears in the April number for this year of "*Revue des deux Mondes*" and is called "*la Gymnastique à Stockholm*." Both authors speak from personal knowledge of the subject, having spent some time at the Royal Gymnastic College in Stockholm, and recommend a study of the Swedish system on account of its thoroughness, scientific basis, and obvious good results upon the youths.

In England, with the Englishman's well-known love for bodily health and vigour working in its favour, there should be a bright future and rapid

progress for Physical Education. But time and a distinct place in the School curriculum must be given to the subject. This, I think, would be best accomplished by insisting upon Educational Gymnastics being introduced as part of the School Hygiene, to which the exercises, as necessary for the healthy development of the children, rightly belong.





