

PREPARING YOUNGER CHILDREN FOR A GREAT BOOKS EDUCATION

by Wes Callihan



ROMAN
ROADS
MEDIA

Introduction

The goal of a classical liberal arts education is to free a person (thus “liberal” = liberating) from the narrowness, rigidity, and prejudice which is the natural characteristic of our minds. The goal of a Christian classical education is to do so for the glory of God. While it is true that apart from salvation an educated person may be nothing more than an educated fool, it is also true that an ignorant Christian, no matter how godly, is limited by that ignorance; an educated Christian is a more effective servant of God because his natural abilities and talents have been developed rather than allowed to atrophy. The tradition of education in western civilization has been propelled for nearly two millenia by Christianity, during which time it has always assumed diligent training in godliness by a child’s parents as an underpinning to education.

That assumed, the liberation of a child’s mind is accomplished by teaching him the following, which can be grouped according to the classical

Trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric (the first five points)—and Theology, the King of the Sciences (the last two points):

1. to listen and read carefully;
2. to think clearly and express himself persuasively;
3. to comprehend his position in space, time, and culture and his relation to other places, times, and people;
4. to appreciate and learn from the difference between his own and those other places, times, and people;
5. to enjoy a wider range of beauty as a result of that wider exposure;
6. to devote himself to continued learning on his own, using the tools of learning acquired in the previous five points;

7. to evaluate, and ascribe the proper significance to, all of the above in the light of a transcendent, absolute standard;
8. to construct and defend a coherent, biblical worldview as a result of his education.

It is NOT to get a job.

What and How We Learn

In light of that one goal of liberal arts education and the above eight objectives, what and how do we teach our children? Consider first that many different kinds of studies contribute to the "liberal" mind besides academics; music and art, for instance. There are also disciplines which are beneficial, even necessary, and which contribute to the appreciation and enjoyment of life but do not contribute significantly to that liberated condition of mind which we desire for our students; among these are athletics. There are

still other areas in which children need training, such as the habits of manner and conversation which we call civilized or "gentle"; those patterns of life which make a person gracious and courteous, which make him desirable company.

In the present discussion I focus on academic study not because those other studies are unimportant, but rather because disciplining the mind in rigorous, propositional, linear thought about certain core subjects, and learning to appreciate and glory in the beauties of language and words, must be at the heart of education. If it is not, then those other studies will be an incoherent collection of particulars with no overarching, coherent world-view into which to fit them and with which to find real meaning for them.

The subjects we are concerned with, then, are literature, history, languages, math, science, logic, and rhetoric. Formal logic and rhetoric are generally reserved for upper levels, so in this discussion of the preparation of younger students we will consider only the first five.

Principles and Application

The suggestions that follow are just that—suggestions—as the important principles behind them, drawn from the philosophy of a classical liberal arts education described above, will have very different applications in different families. Do not be trapped into comparing your family’s approach to education with another family’s based merely on the techniques or methods you follow—you may either panic or be tempted by pride. “Who art thou that judgest another man’s servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth.” The manner in which you cause your child to be educated is only important insofar as it embodies the principles that are the real issue. Therefore, we will consider the principles in each case, along with some suggestions for application.

Remember the Trivium: in all subjects, at the lower levels, focus on the memorization of facts. Use the child’s capacity for absorbing and storing information, and for enjoying that process, even when he doesn’t

understand the information. This doesn't mean that no discussions of the logical relationships or the poetic beauty of things will arise, just that the emphasis in younger children's minds is less on logic and rhetoric than on the grammar of things.

Subjects: Reading

The first important principle is that a child should learn to read well, since reading is the fundamental tool of all subsequent education. It is not critical that he learn to read extremely early; on the other hand, if he shows aptitude for reading early on, he should be encouraged heartily. Even if he doesn't show a readiness to read at an early age, familiarize him with the look and sound of words by reading aloud, and with the look and sound of the alphabet with play blocks and songs. It is very important that he learn to read phonetically, as this ingrains a fundamental paradigm of thinking and reasoning and affects much more than the decoding of words.

Once a child can read, choose good books. The child doesn't have to read grown-up books from the beginning, but as C. S. Lewis said, if an adult doesn't enjoy it, the child probably won't either. We want to train our children's imaginations as well as their reading ability. For small children, there is delight in the sounds of language in Dr. Seuss, but there is real imaginative beauty in the stories of Beatrix Potter, and the Brambly Hedge series. Older children will find the same beauty in *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and the Princess books of George MacDonald. Follow this principle as your children grow: feed their imaginations as well as their rational minds, for the imagination is the fertile ground in which all other studies can grow best.

Choose reading material carefully, but don't agonize over the ultimate cultural value of everything he gets his hands on. Cultivate his taste in reading, but don't fret when you discover his taste is immature. After all, he's a child. A child learns to read and to enjoy reading much more readily if his parents read to him, and the more the better. As the child

grows, he and they both should read aloud regularly. Read all kinds of books: stories, poetry, plays, fiction, essays, biography, history, etc., taking into account his maturity level. Learn to read aloud well so that the child will learn the power and beauty of words and so that he will learn to read aloud well himself. He will imitate what he hears. Listen to your child read aloud--correct what is important, not everything he does wrong. When one element is mastered, correct another important area.

Subjects: Writing

Writing can be integrated naturally into a child's reading. A very common and valuable practice for hundreds of years—until this century—was that of copying. Students of classical rhetoric have always recognized imitation as the first stage of learning, and its value must not be overlooked. For example, have your child first copy words, then sentences, then paragraphs and longer passages from good writing in the course of their elementary study. Have them copy

passages from their reading books, from the Bible, from their history books--but remember to choose carefully.

Choose material that is valuable in form and content, because a good share of the value of copying lies in the fact that the child's mind will be formed by the style, manner, sentiment, and diction of those passages you set him to copy. The Bible is obviously an excellent choice, as are speeches by famous people, passages from plays, and other bits of literature you'd like them to remember. Poems are excellent material for copying and there should be lots of poetry memorization. No one has *ever* regretted remembering poetry, as an adult, that he memorized as a child. Have the child copy what you read aloud sometimes; occasionally have him take notes or outline what you read aloud or what he reads in his books. Have him recount to you what he's read, or summarize what you've read aloud.

The second part of imitation is attempting original work. Your child

can make the transition by paraphrasing the passages he copies, outlining it, reducing it in length (distilling it), later trying to return it to its original form without reference to the original, changing it to poetry, etc. This forces him to think more carefully about the relationship between meaning and language, and to think carefully about the necessity of a powerful vocabulary that can bear the pressure of paraphrase and the tension of translation.

The third part of imitation is writing original paragraphs, essays, poems, plays, short stories, etc., consciously imitating the style of authors he has copied and adapted. Eventually the child will assimilate the wide varieties of styles and manners he has read and copied into his own natural writing style and manner, just as he assimilates into his own natural style those habits of gesture and speech he sees in his parents; this is the real source of originality.

In the process of these writing exercises, you can work on your child's spelling; spelling practice is considerably more productive in the

context of writing practice. Draw spelling words from the child's writing and reading.

And as in reading, so in writing also, correct what is important and expect what is manageable. As he grows, expect more of him and correct more intensively.

Subjects: History

An absolutely critical role of classical education is teaching a student the relevance of the past. Knowing God depends on knowing history—what God has done for His people as recorded in the Scriptures, and what He has done for them in the last two millenia. And knowing oneself also depends on knowing history--where we came from and why we are who we are. The twentieth century has decided that the past is irrelevant, and in an excess of mind-boggling arrogance it considers our age to be the definition of reality, truth, and value. Education must oppose this in the strongest possible manner. If we teach our children primarily modern

history, they will succumb to the disease. But if we teach them that our age is just one in a long series of ages, that our culture will pass and another succeed it, that ours is not intrinsically more right about what it believes or valuable in what it has produced than any other, they will be far better equipped to learn the lessons of the past. This is another reason for using primary sources in studies as much as possible and for reading the Great Books: if all our studies of the past are from modern books, we are still stuck in the present.

A child needs to form an increasingly focused mental map of history and of the world in order to comprehend his place in space and time; physical maps aid this tremendously. In all his studies, use timelines of history, use maps and globes of the world, and use pictures (of art objects and architecture, etc.) from other places and times.

Don't hesitate to teach ancient history to young children; there are valuable resources for doing this, and the necessity of understanding the

Scriptures requires that we teach its historical and cultural context (which means ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome) and the context of the Church since the time of Christ (which means medieval Europe and the early modern world). Use primary sources as much as possible to let the past speak in its own voice.

Subjects: Languages

The goal and purpose of learning another language is to communicate in that language, to comprehend ideas and beauties through another linguistic pattern. The goal of learning classical languages is to read books in Greek and Latin. There are tremendous side benefits to learning these languages, such as improved English vocabulary and training in critical thinking skills, but these should not taken as the primary benefits, for alone they are woefully inadequate motivations for learning another language.

A good beginning in language study for younger students can be simple

vocabulary acquisition and short phrases or sentences to be memorized. Progress to simple grammar and sentences, and eventually to full grammatical study and reading, can take several years and needn't be hurried, but the end result should be real reading ability in real texts. The difficulties of translation, especially the almost insurmountable problems of translating poetry, should be impressed upon the student at every opportunity by means of examples and practice, so that the student will begin to see the great value of reading old books in their own native tongue.

Since most classical works require a certain maturity of understanding, students will not be ready for most classical texts until junior high or high school anyway, and therefore another valid approach is to wait until the student is near his early teens and then do the grammar study more quickly, say in a year or two. In either case, remember the Trivium: inductive approaches based on reading have a valuable place, but they ought never to supplant deductive grammar and

memorization of rules and vocabulary--orthodox grammar study is simply the best foundation, without question, if the student is to be conversant in the language in the long run. There are good elementary level primers and grammars available.

Latin is a good language to begin with, as it was the universal language of western civilization for well over fifteen hundred years and was consequently the original language of vast numbers of our great books, and a tremendous influence on literature of other languages. Besides providing the basis for the majority of our present vocabulary, Latin has also had a significant impact on modern syntax. It is the parent language of the modern romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish, etc.) and makes the study of those languages much easier.

Subjects: Mathematics

Most homeschoolers are comfortable with teaching math at the younger

levels, and most are familiar with the approaches which treat early math in a “grammar-stage” manner; that is, with lots of repetition of material, etc. Therefore, little time needs to be spent discussing this subject here.

Subjects: Science

A good approach to beginning science for elementary students is through what used to be called “natural history”; that is, a more informal study of the natural world based on observation, rather than laboratory experimentation or a technical study of the micro- or macro- realms, or theoretical, heavily mathematically based “pure science”. The “natural history” approach needs little in the way of equipment and expense, it fits the Trivium philosophy, and concords with a liberal arts approach to education. The “hard” sciences can be reserved for high school.

Natural history can include weather study, astronomy, geology, plants, animals, and other observable

aspects of the natural realm. Natural history fits easily into writing assignments, art assignments, and literature and history reading. There are good field guides to aid students in their own observations, art books that encourage careful drawing of specimens and phenomena, and field trip opportunities galore.

As the student gets older, he may study the “hard” sciences—biology, chemistry, and physics—but a great books education will include reading in the history of the various sciences to provide a human and historical context for these studies.

To find out about Wes Callihan’s high school curriculum, *Old Western Culture*, go to www.oldwesternculture.com.