



Before Curriculum

How to Start Using the
Charlotte Mason Philosophy
in Your Home

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*How to Start Practicing the Charlotte Mason Philosophy
in your Home*

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Why Atmosphere, Discipline, and Life?

My journey with the Charlotte Mason educational philosophy began when my first child was just a baby. I clicked on an article about homeschooling, and several clicks later, landed on a blog about a British woman who trained teachers at a college in the English Lake District over 100 years ago. Before long, I became fascinated by this woman, Charlotte Mason, and the impact her ideas still have today. As a result, my husband and I never actively made a decision to homeschool. We simply thought and spoke about it for so long that it became the only real option.

I began to read blogs and books about education, homeschooling, and Charlotte Mason. As I sifted through the myriad resources on the Charlotte Mason way, including Charlotte Mason's own published works, I realized that much of her philosophy's beauty lies in its ability to avoid prescriptive, dogmatic answers to complex questions and challenging situations. In her own words, she gives us a method of education that embraces the individuality of children, rather than a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all system.¹

The Charlotte Mason philosophy is much more than a curriculum. It's not a list of 'do's and 'don't's, or a series of items on a to-do list. And while it might sound nice to be told exactly what to do in order to give our children a Charlotte Mason education, we actually have something much better: a set of principles that we use to set our focus, inform our choices, and apply this beautiful, rich philosophy in any context.

¹ Charlotte Mason, *Home Education*, (Living Book Press, 2017), 9.

An Education Based on Principles

Using the Charlotte Mason philosophy starts with understanding the principles behind it. Charlotte Mason herself tells us of the importance of this. In her sixth volume, she says,

I feel strongly that to attempt to work this method without a firm adherence to the few principles laid down would be not only idle but disastrous. “Oh, we could do anything with books like those,” said a master; he tried the books and failed conspicuously because he ignored the principles.²

No one wants their homeschool to be a disaster. We don't want to be idle, and we don't want to fail. But in order to avoid calamity, we need to turn our attention to a few fundamental ideas.

Charlotte Mason distilled her philosophy into twenty principles, and she wrote six books and countless articles explaining, illustrating, and expanding on them. If we include the articles in the magazine she edited in her lifetime and the numerous books, articles, and blogs *about* her philosophy, we can quickly become overwhelmed. We all have full lives and schedules. We need a jumping off point that will allow us to actively practice the Charlotte Mason method while we learn more about it.

With this in mind, I have focused this book on Charlotte Mason's motto, 'Education is an atmosphere, a discipline, and a life'.³ In her philosophy, she refers to these as the three instruments or tools that we use in the education of our children. I will explore what each of these mean later in the book, but first, let's consider what makes these educational tools acceptable, and why

² Charlotte Mason, *An Essay Towards a Philosophy of Education*, (Living Book Press, 2017), 270.

³ Charlotte Mason's Twenty Principles, Principle 5, available at <https://www.amblesideonline.org/CM/20Principles.html>

other tools are off-limits.

The Starting Premise: Children are Born Persons

Charlotte Mason's first principle says, "Children are born persons".⁴ While it is tempting to gloss over this idea, thinking, "of course a child is a *person*", this is not a passing comment and understanding this principle is very relevant to our daily practice of her philosophy.

By "children are born persons", Charlotte Mason means that children are born with everything they need in order to learn, including desire, ability, and motivation. Charlotte Mason believed that schools, teachers, and parents too often appealed to children's other desires in order to motivate learning.⁵ Rewards for a good mark, punishments for a bad one, pressure to fit in with peers or to stand out among them. These are all examples of how we might disrespectfully encroach upon a child's personality. If a child is subject to these forces for too long, then these other desires may overpower and possibly destroy our child's inner motivation to learn.

In place of rewards and punishments, Charlotte Mason gives us the tools of atmosphere, discipline, and life. These tools respect a child's personality and trust that a child desires for knowledge for its own sake. They do not prey upon a child's appetite for success, fame, fear of failure, or anything else.⁶ We employ these tools from a place of trust: we trust that our children have the inner drive to learn, and that our job is *not* to cajole our kids into learning. As Charlotte Mason put it, our children are not oysters, and we are not in the business of stuffing them full of information.⁷

⁴ Charlotte Mason's Twenty Principles, Principle 1.

⁵ Mason, *Philosophy*, "The Sacredness of Personality", 80-93

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mason, *Philosophy*, 33.

Atmosphere, discipline and life are the means to an education without carrots and sticks. If that's what you want for your children, this book - and the Charlotte Mason way - are for you.

* * *

If you would like an extra helping hand as you work your way through the principles of atmosphere, discipline, and life, I have a free workbook available at <http://aroundthethicket.com/workbook>. The sections in the workbook align with the chapters in this book and provide action-oriented prompts and questions so that you can better apply these concepts in your home.