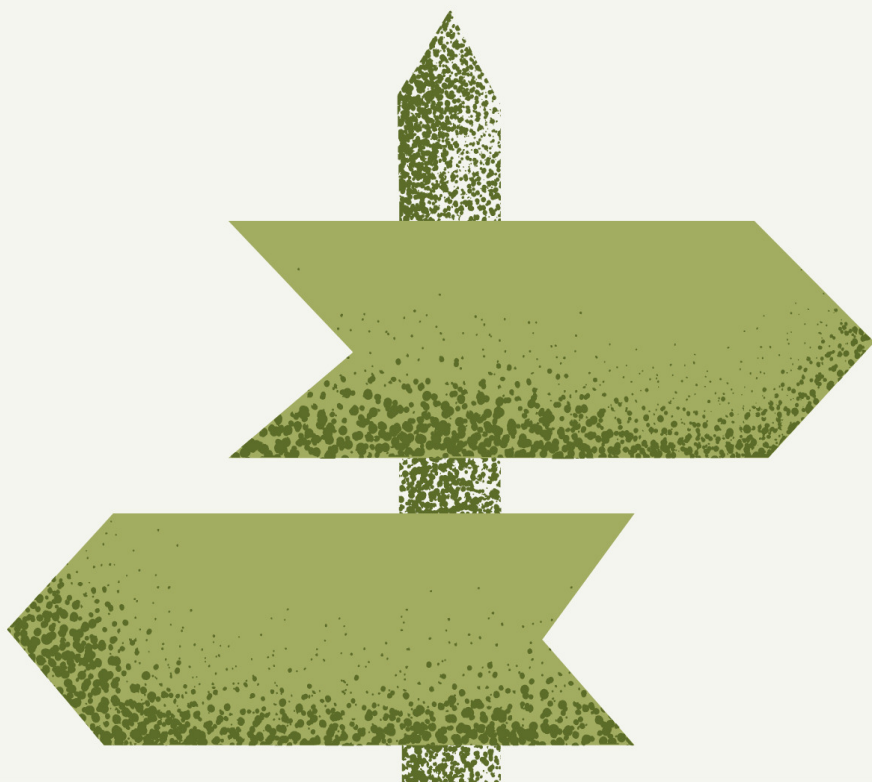


AROUND THE THICKET
NEWSLETTERS

Habits

AMY FISCHER



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Letters from Around the Thicket

Habits

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First edition

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Preface

I started my blog, Around the Thicket, in 2016 as a place to write about life as a mom of very young children. My blog has grown with me and my children and I now write about teaching those same boys at home, as well as my own self-education, as Charlotte Mason would put it.

As an extension of my blog, I have long sent email updates to subscribers. Only in this last year, however, have I started to focus on emails as ways to develop a writing habit and to communicate more casually with people interested in my thoughts and experiences. In each email I have hoped to give, at the very least, food for thought, and have often tried to give practical insight into practicing the Charlotte Mason philosophy.

The following chapters come from emails I sent in 2020. I have removed announcements and updates that were time-sensitive, but the content is otherwise the same. I hope they give you a taste for what I send to subscribers each week.

If you would like to receive these emails yourself, please visit <https://aroundthethicket.com/subscribe>.

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How to Start Building a Habit of Obedience

Good morning!

In the last episode of the Thinking Love podcast this season, my cohost Leah and I jumped head first into a discussion of one of the most talked about habits in the Charlotte Mason sphere: the habit of obedience. [It was a great episode, and I hope you'll listen](#), but I want to take this email to talk about how we really get started establishing this habit in our home.

First of all, let me share that my kids aren't perfectly habit trained. They can do incredible mischief, are prone to inexplicable moments of deafness while I'm speaking, and even when I know that they have heard me, they don't always do what I say. Habit training, especially the habit of obedience, starts with appreciating our kids as they are: imperfect, immature humans in desperate need of instruction, guidance, love, and grace.

Interestingly, we as parents can say the same thing of ourselves. We are imperfect, immature humans in desperate need of instruction, guidance,

love, and grace. Fortunately for us and for our children, God has abundantly supplied for our needs through His Word, His Spirit, and His Son. Just like our children, we are still learning, growing in character, and increasing in wisdom and knowledge. We are on the same path as our children, just a little bit ahead.

We can even use the same tools for educating ourselves and growing in character as we use with our children: learning through atmosphere, living ideas, and yes, developing good habits.

The habit of obedience in our children starts when we as parents establish a habit of following through with what we ask of our kids.

When we ask our children to do something, we have to carefully navigate any grumbling, distraction, or defiance in order to help our children obey. The more consistently we do this, the more our children will get into a rhythm and habit of listening to instructions and doing what we ask.

When Leah and I put together our [Habit Training Workshop](#), we wanted to acknowledge this fact: our effectiveness in habit training depends on us developing good habits, too. We need habits of following through and of perseverance in order to gain traction with habit training over the long run. Our workshop doesn't just discuss tips and tricks for habit training, but digs into principles and spends time exploring how we can leverage our own habits to help us in our efforts.

All the best,

Amy

The Key to Helping Your Children with Moral Habits

Good morning!

On the blog this week I'm sharing about moral habits and how we help our children establish those habits through habit training.

It's one thing to think about helping our children build habits of making the bed, shutting doors, and even saying 'please' and 'thank you'. Those are things we can actually see. We can check up on them. If our children haven't followed through, we can help them along the way.

Habits of this sort are great. They help our home run smoothly and help our children grow a little more independent. (Did you know that Charlotte Mason says we habit train in order to practice masterly inactivity more?) But what about the big picture of habit training? How does it fit into the formation of character which Charlotte Mason says is the ultimate goal of education?

This is where we start thinking about moral habits. Habits of obedience,

patience, self-control, perseverance are much more abstract and difficult to conceptualize. It's easy to see when they aren't there, but this doesn't help us teach our children how to embody these traits in real life.

Fortunately, we have other educational tools to help our children learn about these ideas: atmosphere and life. Life as it happens, the books we read, the conversations we have give our children many opportunities to witness, experience, and consider virtue and (the lack of it).

[As I mention in the post](#), there are other ways to start with moral habits, but ultimately this is the key to habit training in moral habits. Rather than beginning with dictionary definitions, lectures, or lessons, we allow our children to learn through life and providing a feast of ideas.

All the best,

Amy

One Simple Step to More Consistent Habits

Good morning!

Over the lockdown period there have been some positive changes in my home. It took me a while to realize it but, somewhere along the way my husband and I stopped having battles with my five year old over getting dressed in the morning.

I shared about this [habit training goal on my blog](#) over a year and a half ago after a rocky start. I don't mention this in the post, but I ended up with the entire contents of my son's closet at the bottom of the stairs. While we made slow gains in this area, this habit cemented itself in at the beginning of lockdown when, with nowhere to go, we began eating breakfast as a family every day.

I created a breakfast menu loop of seven relatively simple meals, got the groceries, and my husband very kindly took over the cooking. There have been many benefits: Instead of taking orders like a short-order cook, we now sit down to the same meal at the same time. Behavior at the table is much better. And my son now consistently gets dressed

before our meal, typically without being asked.

As it turns out, rhythm and routine are *great* for habit training.

In fact, **consistency** and **consistent cues** are the simplest way to get started in establishing new habits. A habit cue is simply the signal that it's time to do the habit, whether it's getting dressed, washing hands, or saying 'please'. If that cue isn't strong and regular, then we (and our children) will struggle to practice the habit enough times to start doing it on autopilot.

If you're working on habits with your children or even yourself and you're struggling to get off the ground, take a step back and consider your cues. Are the cues clear? Do they take place *every time* the habit needs to happen?

For a 'getting dressed' habit to click with my son, he needed a predictable pattern for his morning routine. This patterns of routine give my son the cues to get dressed at the right time of day. He is proud of himself and pleased with his independence, and the whole family is enjoying smoother mornings.

I'd love to hear about how habit training is working for you - hit reply and let me know!

All the best,

Amy

Habit Training Starts with Us

Good morning!

This month, my newsletters are all about habit training! Today I'm wrapping up some thoughts on this topic.

Charlotte Mason tells us that when we help our children learn good habits, we 'secure for ourselves smooth and easy days'. It's easy to imagine, even if it feels like a far cry from our current reality. Children who do what they ought without being asked? No friction-filled power struggles? Sign me up.

But often, when we attempt to help our kids with their habits, we find our efforts frustrated, and it's not just our kids. It's us.

Instead of life smoothing out, we find ourselves struggling to keep up the momentum, to follow through on our kids' habits *every single time*, to persist when habits just don't seem to gain any traction whatsoever.

There are two reasons why this happens to me. Perhaps it's the same

for you.

1. Habits still take effort – they just remove the effort of decision.

So many times I get distracted thinking that habits should make my life easier – as in, they should reduce my work load. But wiping down a counter top or (fill in the blank with another task you would like to be a habit) still takes energy. It's still work. What a habit does is *remove the effort of decision*. Habits remove decision fatigue. With habits, we stop wasting time and energy dragging our feet to do what we need to do because we do it automatically. **We have to have appropriate expectations on habit training or we will be very disappointed.**

2. Smooth and easy days start with a mom's habits, not her kids'.

If we are dragging our feet every time we need to parent (discipline, teach, guide) our children, our days will never feel smooth. If we have to take time to actively choose to shepherd our children to do what they need to do every time they struggle, we are in for a rough time. **Traction with habit training begins when we make habit training a habit.**

With habit training, there really is no double standard. We aren't in it to make our children better people than we are. We need the discipline of habit just as much as they do, and we should be leading the way. It's our own habits that make our days smooth – not our kids'.

If you'd like more insight into habit training, and some support along the way, please check out the [Habit Training Workshop](#) which I am running with my podcast co-hostess, Leah Martin.

All the best,

HABIT TRAINING STARTS WITH US

Amy

Habit Training Myth Busting

Good morning!

“Habit training is going terribly. Everything that I had going has stopped entirely and I feel so guilty!”

I’ve read and heard variations of this statement many times, and they always make me so sad for the moms confessing what they think is a grievous failure on their part. I want to give them a huge hug, and then tell them some truth about habit training, because it’s clear that at some point along the road, some lies have seeped in.

Habit Training Myth #1: Habit training is always the problem with my kids/my family/myself.

Usually (I would guess 99% of the time) when a mom shares this sentiment, there is more going on. There will be a new baby in the home, a house move, job loss, illness, or a combination of factors that mean that the family is going through a big transition period and that people in the home are *stressed*.

When you are stressed, and/or your kids, *stress* is the problem, not habit training. It is normal for kids to respond to lots of change and emotion with acting out, with resisting routine, discipline, cooperation, and so on. When kids feel insecure, they will push limits *just* to find out that the limits are still there and that they, themselves, are safe within your authority.

Habit Training Truth: Education is an ‘atmosphere’ just as much as education is a ‘discipline’. When life throws stress and change your way, it’s right to shift your focus to helping your children through life circumstances, and slowly get back on board with habits as appropriate.

Habit Training Myth #2: Once my kids have a habit down, I’ll never need to think about it again.

It’s enticing to think that habit training might be one-and-done, but as you can see from the sentiments above, habits shift and change as our life circumstances change. This can come from a house move, adding new, outside-of-the-home commitments to our schedule, or even our children maturing and changing as they grow up.

As I mentioned in my last email, good habits need a strong cue. With lots of change, our cues are all up in the air, which means that habits are never triggered in the first place. Personally, I don’t see this as habit training failure. This will happen to *anyone* who has a habit dependent on place and routine, and anyone in this situation will need to take some time to reevaluate their habit cues and slowly work them back into their day.

Furthermore, as our children grow up, so do our expectations for their habits. It is very likely that our teenagers need less of a routine (or a

different routine) than our toddlers. Our priorities may shift as well, and that's ok. The Charlotte Mason philosophy assumes that children grow, develop, and change over time, and that we can't guarantee a particular outcome by following a specific process.

Habit Training Truth: Habits will naturally shift and change over time, and we will need to adjust our expectations or revisit habits when needed. This is a normal part of the process.

I hope you're enjoying some thoughts on habit training this month! I'd love to answer any questions you might have - hit reply and let me know how I can help!

All the best,

Amy

One Encouraging Secret about Habit Training

Good morning!

This month, my newsletters are all about habit training! I'll be sharing a bit more this week and next week on this topic.

Today I want to share what I think might be the best kept secret about habit training: **you are already doing it.**

Because the phrase 'habit training' isn't terribly common outside of Charlotte Mason circles, it's easy to view it as a novel, even obscure, approach to parenting. However, I think it's less foreign than we make it out to be.

Any time we consistently set a limit in our homes or hold our children to a certain expectation, we are habit training. We all have non-negotiables, areas where our kids may try and try to push a limit, but we are calm, confident, and immovable. These limits and expectations can exist in seemingly trivial areas - personally, my boys wearing shirts at mealtimes

is unequivocally non-optional – but *they still yield habits*.

Why would it matter if the only habits our children have are seemingly inconsequential? Because even in little things, these ‘habit successes’ give us brilliant insight into how we can pursue the bigger habits we want to invest in our children.

In my blog post on this topic, I offer some questions to help reflect on what makes some habits successful, and how we can apply that to other habits we are working on:

- Am I committed to a new habit the same way I am to the successful habit?
- What tone of voice do I use that I could replicate?
- How often do my kids practice the new habit compared to the successful habit?
- How have I shown consistent expectations in the successful habit?
How can I do the same with a new habit?

Thinking over our ‘habit successes’ isn’t just encouraging – it gives us direct insight into how to approach new habits with our kids, and helps us remember that we have more experience than we may initially think.

All the best,

Amy

Habit Training by Grace Alone

Good morning!

Does the idea of habit training make you a little uneasy? Maybe you relate to a post I recently saw on social media, which said that *Habit training is too close to works righteousness, focusing on what we do on the outside, rather than our hearts. There simply isn't a place for grace when you can 'make' yourself (or your children) righteous through your own effort.*

This mom opted out of habit training. And to be honest, I can see her point. Heaven forbid that we should intentionally or unknowingly lead our children down a path of attempting to earn their own righteousness, or delude them into thinking that their external behavior is more important than the attitudes of their hearts. If this is what habit training is, we should flee from it. Fast.

While I am just starting to gather and organize my thoughts about this, I don't think we actually need to ditch habit training. In fact, the more I read beyond Charlotte Mason, the more I see recognition that

understanding habit and growing in the discipline of habit is essential – for both ourselves and our children.

Here are a couple of ideas I’ve met recently that shed more light on *why* we should continue habit training ourselves and our children

1. We confuse practice and repetition with being unauthentic.

Habit training can strike a nerve with us because in our culture, we tend to view repetition as unauthentic. If doing the right thing doesn’t flow naturally from us, then intentionally doing or practicing the right thing *anyway* is somehow artificial. But as James K. A. Smith writes in *You are What You Love*, there is really no way to grow in virtue without practice. Practice, he says, is about *obedience*, not *authenticity*. If you want to be a piano player, you have to begin by acting like one in repeated, diligent practice, even if we aren’t very good and even if we don’t feel like it. It’s the only way to make progress. Likewise, if we want to be like Christ, we practice imitating Him.

2. Sanctification and justification are different, yet both essential.

This is an idea from J.C. Ryle’s *Holiness*. He writes that we are apt to confuse the two, and encourages the reader to remember that when we come to faith, we are immediately and completely justified through no merit of our own. Our debt is paid – end of the story. But we are called to grow in Christlikeness, and it *pleases* God when we *try* to imitate Him, even though we do so imperfectly. Yes, we are justified. Yes, we are saved through grace alone. But yes, we also walk the road of growing in holiness, and this includes deliberate effort on our parts.

3. We have habits whether we acknowledge them or not – and we must consider what direction they are leading us in. Charlotte Mason herself stated that we are creatures of habit. If we aren’t

thoughtful about our children's habits, they will develop habits anyway. James K. A. Smith agrees with this sentiment – and suggests that habits can and ought to be a means of grace – forming in us an orientation towards God and His purposes. So it is right to think about the habits of our family, and ask ourselves, 'What direction are these habits taking us in? Are they taking us toward Christ, and leading us to love him more, or are they growing our desire for things of the world?'

I don't think habit training is a form of works righteousness – as long as we do the important work of asking ourselves, 'Who am I imitating in this habit? Is this habit helping me to love Christ more and to grow to be like him?' If and when we realize we are off course, we repent, and in God's grace we practice again and again, and help our children do the same.

There are lots of myths floating around about habit training.

[Leah and I discuss a few more in a recent episode of the Thinking Love Podcast](#)

I hope you'll take some time to check it out!

All the best,

Amy

About the Author

Amy is a wife and a mom of three boys. Originally from Indiana, she now lives in the northwest of England. She holds a BSc in Applied Mathematics and an MA in Education. She worked for a number of years in higher education before leaving the workforce to care for her children. Her hope for her children is that they grow to be curious, thoughtful, self-motivated problem solvers, who can teach themselves anything they want to know.

Amy shares the practical working-out of her parenting and education philosophies at her blog, Around the Thicket. She regularly writes about mother culture, parenting, and the Charlotte Mason philosophy of education.

You will also find her on the Thinking Love podcast, where she is a co-host on the show, chatting about Charlotte Mason, the early years, and more.

You can connect with me on:

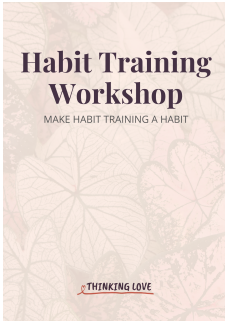
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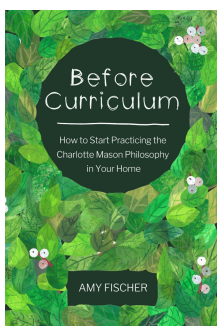
Habit Training Workshop

<https://thinkinglove.education/habits>

Habits: we all have them, for better or for worse. As mothers, we want to endow our children with habits that will help them, and not hinder them throughout their lives. But helping our children develop the right habits is not a task for the faint of heart. It is no surprise that we find ourselves discouraged and disappointed.

That's why Amy and Leah developed a Habit Training workshop: to provide the framework, the accountability, and the encouragement needed to gain traction with habit training.

Register for the self-paced course and use code `thicket5` for a \$5 discount.



Before Curriculum: How to Start Practicing the Charlotte Mason Philosophy in Your Home

<https://aroundthethicket.com/before-curriculum>

Unsure where to start. Overwhelmed with options. Spinning your wheels.

Bring simplicity to your Charlotte Mason journey and root yourself in the essentials: deep principles of education that will set your focus, build your confidence, and give you practical tools to educate the Charlotte Mason way.

Instead of tick boxes and to-do lists, Charlotte Mason's broad principles show us how to give our children a beautiful, well-rounded education. With this book, you will learn some of the most action-oriented of these principles: the educational 'tools' of atmosphere, discipline, and life.

You will be able to apply these tools in your home right away and build your confidence as a Charlotte Mason educator – even if you are just starting out.