

AMERICANS OF TOMORROW

November, 1934

Description: Eleanor Roosevelt gives speech on "Elementary Education of Children."

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt

From my point of view the most important years in a child's education are the early years, and, of course, during this period his education must be carried on partly in school and partly at home.

I am a great believer in nursery schools, particularly for children whose parents lead busy lives or where there is difficulty for them to be in contact with other children of their own age. I hope that an increasing number of nursery schools will be included in our public school system so that ultimately no child need be deprived of this valuable training. But even if they can go to nursery school, the home education must cooperate with what they are learning and the mother must be sure to know the methods used in school, for habit is one of the most important things in a child's training and there must be no break in the continuity of a good habit which is being formed.

In this stage of a child's education, toys and play are as important as any so-called education, and practically all this early education is carried on through these mediums. Therefore, the choice of a child's toys becomes really important and fairly large toys, as long as they are not too heavy for the child to handle, are easier to manipulate. A child should be given things to do which he can accomplish without too much strain, so that a sense of self-confidence is established and the satisfaction of personal achievement. Reasoning powers develop later, but the memory is particularly acute at this stage, so this is the time for learning languages, for memorizing words and letters and jingles -- in fact for learning everything which comes through the eyes and ears.

I feel that even very young children may learn a good deal by having as toys models of things which they will use in their activities later on. A certain type of moving picture, not too frequently shown, is valuable in developing a power of observation and concentration. The same is true of mechanical devices as long as they cannot hurt themselves with them. A small boy enjoys using a hammer and nails, and crayons which at first wandered aimlessly over the paper soon develop into real pictures. Even a three-year old child will find a typewriter fascinating and will soon learn to operate it. In the same way all these things are moving toward the one end which is the fundamental purpose of all education, particularly in early years, namely, the development of the power to concentrate and to coordinate physical[ly]. That is why a child should be allowed to finish anything which is begun. Many children will do one thing for a few minutes, then drop it and turn to something new. That usually is the result of parents not considering what the child is doing as important and frequently interferi[ng] by telling the child to do something else. This breaks their attention[n] and their interest, which at best is easily diverted and lost.

For this reason the nursery school is particularly valuable for each child can carry his own activity, but at the same time be learning that he cannot interfere with the activities of others, and I doubt if anything is more valuable to proper conduct in life later on than these two things - the ability to carry on your own activity and to do your own work regardless of outside distraction, and yet to consider other people and not interfere with them.

In homes where there are several children, the smaller children very often do not have the opportunity to be themselves in the way that the[y] do in nursery school, where trained people are watching over them and making sure that other personalities do not overshadow them. I know of one example, where the elder child in the family was an extremely dominant personality and until the younger child was sent to nursery school away from his older brother, he seemed to have no real personality of his own. If he were asked a question the elder one would answer for him before he got a chance to answer for himself, but a few weeks under a trained supervisor with children whom he did not know so well developed his

independence and his desire to stand upon his own feet. Mothers must remember that, while they have some things which no teacher can have, they frequently do not have the training in child psychology and child care, and it is well for them to educate themself[es] when their children are being educated. After all, it is in the home where all the fundamental qualities of character must be developed, an[d] character means everything to a child and to an adult in later life.

Another thing which is important in handling young children is to prevent any timidity or fear if possible. It is very easy to frighten a child into deceit. We must realize that often we seem very much more terrifying because of our size and strength, and that even a raised voice to the tender ears of a child may be a very menacing and terrifying thing. This sense of fear is one of the worst things that can happen to any child, and here the home and the school are equally responsible. Parents must build up a sense of trust and confidence, otherwise their future hold upon the child is endangered. A small child needs security, a sense that they are well taken care of, that the grown-ups around them are fair and just and understand them, and are kind. One of the tragedies of the times which we have been going through is that so many children, even very young ones, have lost their sense of security because it has gone out of the homes in which they live, but even in other times many a child in a home moderately comfortable in a material way, fails in gaining a sense of real security because around them they lack the love and understanding which instinctively makes them trust the world. I doubt if too much love ever hurt a child as long as it was an unselfish love, but children who grow up with too much dependence upon their parents have been loved selfishly and their parents have not trained them with the idea that they must stand on their own feet, being sure of love and understanding behind them in whatever they tried to accomplish. If, however, parents make them feel that they can accomplish little without the help of older people they will make it harder when they have to stand alone. It is a fine distinction and a difficult one sometimes to love enough and yet not too much, for it is extremely pleasant to have our children depend upon us, and yet here again the training should begin with the very earliest years in order to enable them when they reach young manhood and young womanhood to take up their responsibilities without too much difficulty and suffering on their part.

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Transcribed from a script held in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.