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The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children, Susannah Wesley: The Educating of the Wesley Children

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Wesley and Children
Part 1 - The Early Influences of John Wesley, Concerning His Views of the Ministry to Children
Article 3 – Susannah Wesley, #2 – The Educating of the Wesley Children

We continue our walk through The Works of John Wesley. As we do so, we continue our focus on what John Wesley wrote concerning the ministry to children and children’s spirituality. In addition, we continue to look at what practices Wesley himself undertook concerning the ministry to children.

In our effort to understand the influence Susannah Wesley had on her son John, we will focus on a letter sent to John from Susannah in July of 1732. When Susannah died in July of 1742, Wesley chose to include the letter he had received from her in his journal. Within the letter written to John by his mother, there are a number of themes including: 1) the necessity to break the will of the child; 2) the educational method of Susanna Wesley; 3) and the eight key aspects or “by-laws” included by Susannah in the education of her children. Each of the aforementioned themes will be dealt with this month in three separate articles.

In this second article we will look at the particular methods Susannah Wesley employed in the process of educating her children.

When it came to educating her children, Susannah Wesley used the opportunity to begin also to help shape her children’s spiritual education.

“The children of this family were taught, as soon as they could speak, the Lord’s Prayer, which they were made to say at rising and bed-time constantly; to which, as they grew bigger, were added a short prayer for their parents, and some Collects; a short Catechism, and some portion of Scripture, as their memories could bear.”

In addition to their practice of morning and evening prayers, the children were also taught the importance of respect. This understanding of their place in the family and in society, and how they should behave on certain days, at certain places, or toward certain people, was central to their spiritual and educational formation. The areas of respect included respecting the Sabbath and how the children were to address their parents, brothers and sisters, servants, and people outside the family.

Showing respect toward their parents and others within their household included learning very early that crying out was not an option. “When (the children) turned a year old, (and some before,) they were taught to fear the rod, and to cry softly...that most odious noise of the crying of children was rarely heard in the house.” This view towards crying, which some might find as harsh, was defended by Susannah as a way to help her children avoid future problems. In Susannah’s view, by learning to control one’s crying, her children “…escaped abundance of correction they might otherwise have had.”

John, having grown up under these conditions, appears to have been in full support of this view. In his sermon On the Education of Children, he writes,

“Never, on any account, give a child anything that it cries for...for no mother need suffer a child to cry aloud after it is a year old...My own mother had ten children, each of whom had spirit enough; yet not one of them was ever heard to cry aloud after it was a year old.”
John also turned to the testimony of others to support this practice and to support his mother’s belief that in no way does the child suffer any negative consequences as a result of being raised under such conditions. In this particular instance, he included the testimony of a Mr. Parson Greenwood. He quotes Mr. Greenwood as saying:

“This cannot be impossible; I have had the proof of it in my own family. Nay, of more than this. I had six children by my former wife; and she suffered none of them to cry aloud after they were ten months old. And yet none of their spirits were so broken, as to unfit them for any of the offices of life.”

Formal educational training for the Wesley children began upon their fifth birthday. Susannah outlined in her letter how she began the education of the family’s oldest child, Samuel, a method she would continue with each of her children.

“Samuel, who was the first child I ever taught, learned the alphabet in a few hours...and as soon as he knew the letters, began at the first chapter of Genesis. He was taught to spell the first verse, then to read it over and over, till he could read it off-hand without any hesitation.”

Susannah quickly realized that this method’s effectiveness for the child spread beyond simply learning the particular verse in scripture. “What was yet stranger, any word he had learned in his lesson, he knew, wherever he saw it, either in his Bible, or any other book; by which means he learned very soon to read an English author well.” Susannah continued to employ this same method of teaching with each of her children, understanding that each of them advanced in the process at varying rates and degrees.

The Wesley children were taught to obey a structure to their education each day. The “school day” lasted for six hours, and during that time the children understood that their studies were to be their only focus. Loud talking or playing of any kind was not allowed.

We can see in his writings that John thoroughly embraced this idea of structure concerning the educating of children. In an address titled A Plain Account of the People Called Methodist: in a letter to the Reverend Mr. Perronet… we are given by Wesley a description of structure that was put in place by John for the children who attended the Methodist school at Kingswood.

“First. No child is admitted under six years of age. Secondly. All the children are to be present at the morning sermon. Thirdly. They are at school from six to twelve, and from one to five. Fourthly. They have no play-days. Fifthly. No child who misses two days in one week, without leave, is excluded the school.”

These five conditions that John lays out carry a similar structure and order that seem to have been influenced greatly by Susannah. They do seem to lack the same love and concern that his mother’s words so often emphasized. The absence of this tone here though can be attributed most likely to the fact that they appear in a document that was designed more to be a report of general policies, rather than a philosophical account.

In later articles that will appear in this series, extensive time will be given to John’s many visits and concerns to the educational process that took place at the Kingswood school. For this article, however, it seems necessary to include that Wesley’s love and concern for the educational and spiritual development for the children who attended these schools was at the forefront of his thoughts.

In March of 1766, Wesley’s passion concerning the work at Kingswood came out clearly when he wrote, “I rode over to Kingswood; and having told my whole mind to the Masters and servants, spoke to the
children in a far stronger manner than ever I did before. I will kill or cure: I will have one or the other, --a Christian school, or none at all."

A little more than two years after Wesley wrote those words above, a great outpouring of God’s Spirit fell upon the school and the children. Wesley received a number of reports from the masters of the school. One from James Hindmarsh read, “This is the day we have wished for so long; the day you have had in view, which has made you go though much opposition for the good of these poor children.”

And another wrote, “I CANNOT help congratulating you on the happy situation of your family here. The power of God continues to work with almost irresistible force; and there is good reason to hope it will not be withdrawn, till every soul is converted to God.”

John was pleased upon hearing reports such as these about his school. Susannah also was very proud of the routine her children learned within the structure of the educational process she developed. This routine, that included the reading from the psalms and a chapter of the New Testament in the morning before their formal studies and again reading from the psalms and a chapter of the Old Testament when their studies concluded, became a lasting pattern in the lives of her children. Over time the older children were also taught to read these portions of scripture to their younger siblings who had learned to speak but did not yet know how to read. Finally, each child was encouraged to enter daily into private prayers.

The process of educating the children became more than simply a routine for the Wesley children to follow. Eventually it developed into a family custom that Susannah seems to indicate continued on into the later generations of her children’s families.

Contributed by Dan Harris – Coordinator of Evangelism for Children’s Ministries International

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2 Ibid., 387. (the children) was added for clarity. A *Collect* is a short prayer comprising an invocation, petition, and conclusion; *specifically often capitalized*: one preceding the eucharistic Epistle and varying with the day (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collect accessed April 19, 2011.
3 Ibid., 387.
5 Ibid., I, 16, p. 93, Wesley quoting Mr. Parson Greenwood, whom he adds was “well known in the North of England.
6 Ibid., 390.
7 Ibid., 390.
8 Ibid., 390.“School-Day” here describes the time set out for the children’s studies each day. Susannah set their schedule nine in the morning until noon, and then again in the afternoon from two until five. She called this their “school-hours.”
11 Ibid., 320. James Hindmarsh, in a letter sent to John Wesley.
12 Ibid., 320. From an unnamed master at the Kingswood school to John Wesley.
13 Ibid., 391. Susannah wrote, “And, I thank God, the custom is still preserved among us.”