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Imitation in the Child

Education begins with imitation. It is as natural for the normal child to imitate as it is for the normal man to think. The child in fact is a more perfect imitator than the man. For he copies even the smallest details of the speech, gestures, and general manner of conduct of those with whom he lives. No man wants to copy with such exactitude. It would reflect upon his originality; it would be puerile. But with the child it is different. Imitation is his only resource for development. He learns even the commonest actions, walking, for example, or speaking, by imitation. He accustoms himself to the persons and things of his environment by imitation; he prepares himself for society, with its ever increasing demands and complexities, by imitation. No matter where he ends on life's road, he begins with imitation. It is the unconscious law of his nature. He does as he sees others doing; he follows directions literally. How else could he learn? He is wanting in mental maturity; he lacks ability to guide himself; he does not as yet possess the discriminating and selective forces that characterize the adult. These things he must acquire by observant experience which at this age is but another name for imitation. And where does he most naturally look for guidance in these matters? To the parents, of course. His future lies in their hands. It is the weight of their living and inspiring example, more than any "do this or that" that counts for everything in the moulding of the child. This is plain fact, though some parents seem to regard it as fancy. It is during the tender age when the child is under the parents' supervision that the instinct of imitation is strongest. This is the most fruitful time for grafting habits of solid piety and industry on the growing and pliant faculties of the child. True, he will not appreciate until he is older the moral nature of such good habits; but the probability is that he will live to everlastingly bless his parents for their care and virtuous example in the impressionable years of his childhood.