



# The Home

## Imagination in the Child

**I**MAGINATION is a strange thing! Day and night it toils and strains, and yet never seems to grow tired. It works in two ways: passively or unconsciously, as in our dreams, when it is more or less independent of control; and actively or constructively, when, ruled into submission by the will, it operates for some definite purpose. The constructive imagination is able in its wonder way to take elements from our previous experiences and, under the direction of our intellectual forces, form them into entirely new images. Every creature of the inventor's brain is largely a work of the constructive imagination; and the same is true of painting, sculpture, poetry, of every product, in fact, of fine art or original genius. The healthy and normal child very soon after birth begins to exercise his imagination in both ways we have described.

Fancy can combine images which have been received from the outer world into strange new figments that have no reality whatever in nature. Thus I can magnify an insect crawling on my window-pane to the size of an elephant, and terrorize myself with the thought of its horrible powers. This is what Edgar Allen Poe has done in one of his fascinating tales; and this is precisely the way in which children frighten themselves into convulsions over some trivial affair. While then the imagination is very useful in the development of the infant, it is at the same time very dangerous. It needs guidance and that of the strictest kind if it is not to run riot and cause violent damage to mental growth. We perceive at once the necessity of surrounding the child from the beginning with an atmosphere that will create wholesome perceptions from which the fancy will draw a suitable array of images or mental pictures.

Imagination, left to itself, is as wayward as an untamed steed. It deals with images just as it pleases; it is entirely unreliable. Of all our faculties it demands the most rigid and straight-laced surveillance. In the child the use of imagination is spontaneous. It is undirected by any deliberate control of the

will, for self-restraint comes only by slow degrees. The child seems incapable of making any distinction between perceptions and images, that is, between what is real and what is only fanciful. Until his tenth year he is living in a world of make-believe, surrounded by vivid imagery of every description. Most of his ideas are of the imaginary type. This is one reason why the child, in telling things as they really appear to him, is often mistaken for a fibber. Deception with him is in reality self-deception. At this age the child is fond of fairy tales and stories of a fabulous character. They fit in well with his world of poetry, and answer many secret longings of his heart. Animals and insects, flowers and even lifeless objects, become his intimate companions, endowed in his eyes with instincts and desires like his own.

Control of imagination grows with strength of will. Here is where the parents' careful supervision begins. They should be warned against the use of bug-bears or similar ruses to frighten their children into obedience. It is an expedient that is too dearly bought; for such foolish and unnatural means of restraint are often the fundamental cause of morbid fears and obsessions in later life. It is true that the child soon abandons his belief in such bugaboos, but the effect which a fright in tender infancy leaves upon his mind will frequently persist for long years.

Chief of all reasons for properly cultivating the imagination lies in the fact of its possessing a deep and significant import for all forms of intellectual life. Its functions are requisite in all thinking processes, so much so indeed, that any disorder in the fancy will inevitably result in an abnormal mental state. The only way to keep it healthy is to nourish it on wholesome material and guard it against a tainted environment. The mind can be pure only on condition that the imagination is pure. Parents should study the type of imagination that predominates in their children, in order to make themselves not only loving but intelligent directors of the welfare of their offspring. In the majority of cases the child, because of his mental immaturity, will be found to be almost exclusively interested in images of action. Life in all its forms appeals to him vigorously. Furthermore he will upon a natural impulse attempt to carry out in reality whatever attracts his fancy. He must be cautiously protected therefore against all influences that may prove to be instruments of evil in tainting and corrupting his innocent heart.