O man is born into this world whose work is not born with him: there is always work, and tools to work withal, for those who will.

James Russell Lowell.
Nervous Children and How to Help Them

By Grace C. Kempton

A normal child is born with a free body and a power for well-balanced activity. In rest he gives up his whole weight, and in action seldom wastes force. But all children are not normal, and many who are normal at birth fall into nervous habits and disorders during their earliest years.

In order to protect the normal condition we must closely observe it. In order to develop normal action and reaction we must know definitely what we want.

Watch the breathing of a healthy baby. See how easily each breath is drawn and how evenly! see how loosely and heavily the child's body lies upon the bed when he sleeps! watch his eating and his motion, and from him you will get many practical suggestions. Acquire the freedom, balance, lightness in action, weight in rest, and ease, yourself, and you will be in a position to lead children on in a natural way. Grow trustful in the way that little children are trustful, and great light will be given you to preserve their trust, which is a part of their normal life. Two-thirds of the nervousness of little children is caused by their personal surroundings.

Each normal child is made in harmony with Nature's laws; to serve his best development we must make the conditions of his life agree with these same laws. We must work with Nature, not in opposition to her. Let the children grow as the daisies do; let us interfere only when we must, and the growth will be sure and strong.

A healthy baby will gain by lying unattended for an hour or more at a time. A baby trained by habit to go to sleep unrocked has begun the lesson of quiet in both body and mind. Hands off! we must read on the brow of the well-cared-for child, who, happy in his independence, would free himself into nervousness had he interfering attendance.

Make the baby comfortable in every way, then let it alone, if you want healthy nerves and a good child. Sincere watching of free and normal action will picture it in your mind. Hold to this picture, neither allowing the child to interfere nor interfering yourself. Think of yourself as the remover of obstacles to the child's growth, not as one who would mold at personal will the sensitive and fertile material. Law will do this; you must serve law. Emotional excitement or punishment is an interference, and therefore causes a nervous condition. The feelings of a child wrought to a high pitch over some misdeed, recover with a debt of waste to the beautiful forces of his nature.

The same law which makes the bud bloom, and causes the tide to go and come, is at work in the little child. We must reverence that law if we seek the child's harmony, liberty, and happiness. Establishing nature as our guide, we shall get more light constantly on the orderly development of our children.

Nature's rhythm for rest and action is exact. Why not let the children, even the older ones, fall in with it? They will as surely reap good results as the cows and hens.

Imagine a hen clucking her brood out after the sun had given to all its invitation to rest! Yet many a mother decks her children and leads them forth at the hour which usually finds them asleep. And the mother has a mind with which to appreciate order, health, and harmony!

The high pressure of the day has a strong tendency to develop nervous disorders in children. Only a firm and
determined effort for simplicity can withstand the strength of the current. Simple tasks, simple foods, simple recreations, will all help to keep the faces fresh and the bodies orderly. The friction caused by family hurry injures children’s nervous systems. Rushing to school from the table, to trains, etc.—all is an expensive drain upon the nervous forces.

Little troubles which no one has time to soothe or explain make a demand upon the sensitive system of a child which we cannot calculate. To avoid this we must train the child to regard little troubles as little. We must throw a light of peace and strength on disturbing happenings, and the child unconsciously will form the same habit. Observation will show that children often reflect the nervous condition of those about them, the nervous attitudes and habits. The power to sleep will be cultivated in every child, and no trouble should be spared to do it. It may take weeks or even months of patient effort, but the reward is very great. Different ways are needed, but with the majority simple means are successful. Make the child’s body comfortable, see that he is neither hungry nor thirsty, that he has fresh air, is warm, and all previous conditions happy in a quiet way. This will be enough; an obedient, normal child will be soothed by the good conditions, and will soon, upon lying still, fall asleep. With an excitable child only a few minutes’ quiet could be required on the first day. These few minutes can be so gradually lengthened that the child will feel no pressure, and will gradually learn that, with obstacles removed, sleep can come.

This training saves little children much weariness and fatigue. On a journey, during a tiresome visit, or under other trying circumstances, a nap comes easily, and smooths the rough place. I have seen children sleeping refreshingly in a railway-car, instead of wearing themselves and others with fret from need of rest.

Another cause of the highly strung nervous system in the children of this century is the large amount of reading-matter that is permitted them. Much of it has no invigorating influence; it is a crude mass, and affects the child as such. A wise mother allowed her daughter of twelve one new book a year, and that a good one. This book, with those of former years, could be read and re-read. This might be an extreme plan for a child of less imaginative temperament, but in the case cited it made a far simpler matter of brain impression, and did its part to prevent the much-dreaded nervousness.

Nature is a safe companion and playmate and teacher for children. Unite them to her in every way, and the nerves of each child will grow more orderly. The sweet breath of a cow, and contact with her slow and peaceful animal existence, has never been known to do much but help a child to the same sort of low tension. The child’s way of being led must be unconscious as far as possible. He has so recently departed, if at all, from nature’s paths that the association with creatures whose lives are in touch with nature’s laws is often sufficient to help him back.

Housework in its right proportion and under true conditions is a nerve-trainer to growing children, and helps to order the forces of body and mind healthfully. Housework, to be helpful, must be regular, and filled with interest and energy. Out-of-door work is good for children, if it is happily done.

The best influence from outdoor work is in company of a maturer mind, who can introduce the working children to the habits of the plants and animals among which they work. This keeps the work alive with thought and interest, and prevents monotony.

The study of any natural science has a definite influence against nervous disorder, when systematically taught. On the other hand, avoid your children’s coming into contact with that which is startling and unnatural. Placards and posters advertising the theaters, with newspaper stories and head-lines, may be the causes of much distress to the mind of the child, and bear rapid fruit of nervous tension and waste.

The exercises given in a previous paper may be used here they must be made more passive, and given very playfully.

“Be my pussy,” you say to a tired child. “Ah! pussy lies so still; sometimes she hangs her head down so, and you illustrate with your own head, making it free and loose.

“Now, pussy, I will lift your paw.” And you do it, while the child gives up its hand passively. You approve, and pet and praise, not the child, but the cat. And if the child resists, you show him how far from like a pussy he is. The most nervous children can be relaxed in ways of this kind. Older children may do the exercises very slowly, and for only a few minutes at a time.

The prevailing school system is a hot-house for nervous tension. The objects, chiefly external, are emphasized by methods calculated to impress every pupil. The children of sensitive natures are, therefore, over-impressed. The child must be prepared by a training not too very, not to be over-anxious, and be taught himself to substitute higher motives and ends than the rank he holds in his class. The pressure in school life causes children to bite their fingers and nails, twist their hands, and resort to many other nervous habits which can by gentle but incessant watchfulness be stopped.

The child should be taught to stand with the body erect, feet firmly planted upon the floor, arms hanging loosely and heavily at the sides, and the fingers all free: he should be taught to keep this attitude while reciting, and in every work to use only the part of the body needed for that work; everything else should be quiet. Never let a child hear of his nerves, except physiologically, as marvelous servants—messengers between the body and mind. A pitiful thing it is to hear a little child say, “I am too nervous to read.”

Systematic training of the senses tends to equalize nervous forces, and is, therefore, opposed to nervousness. The body must be trained to be quiet, then each sense is exercised in a progressive manner, while by the whole quiet is maintained.