XIII. DOMESTIC HANDICRAFT FOR GIRLS

IN PAPER, CARTON, CARDBOARD, AND WOODWORK

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Introduction.—The reasons for introducing handwork of some kind among girls need little exposition among those who have made a study of the psychology of handwork in relation to the education of boys in the elementary schools. The value of the subject in developing the whole boy, and its position as the primitive and fundamental means of instruction for every child are daily becoming more firmly established by every experiment and every phase of educational research work that is undertaken.

In the infant school no difference is made in the instruction given to boys and girls. In the lower standards in some schools the same work is also taken with both. It is, however, seldom that we find in the upper school any training given to the girls comparable with the handwork in card, wood, and metal given to the boys. The girls are drafted off to the cookery, laundry, and housewifery centres and to the needlework class, while the boys are sent to the woodwork and metal-work centres. From the point of view of utility this appears quite reasonable to nearly every one, and in the past in this country it has been looked upon as quite unladylike for a girl to use a hammer or other mechanic's tool efficiently and to good purpose. Only quite recently has a girl been allowed to ride a bicycle, play hockey, or show that her power of endurance is often quite equal to that of her brother on a long country ramble. Still in the upholstery trade a woman must not cut off a piece of cloth from a roll for a
curtain, or chair cover, though she may cut it about as much as she likes afterwards. Neither, without incurring again the wrath of the Trade Union which deals with such matters, may she use a hammer to nail on a blind, though she is allowed to sew it on.

A woman may, and often does, spend eight or ten hours a day at the washtub, or scrubbing floors, beating carpets, shaking heavy curtains, or at other laborious work, yet the use of the hammer and other tools is thought to tax her strength unduly. The wife or sister will not trust herself to drive a nail in a wall, to hang a picture, or make a place for a broom, but fetches heavy steps from the cellar, finds hammer, rule, and nails, and holds up the man and the steps while he drives the nail. Surely, when one sees such things every day, it points either to some fault in the girl’s education, or to some lack in her character. Why could she not drive the nail, while the man, capable of greater physical development, might be freed to do the heavier work for which she is not so well fitted. In many cases, too, it would save very much time and trouble if a woman could do such a job herself, even though it involved the use of a rule instead of a tape measure, or meant the handling of a tool that really cuts.

Purpose of the Scheme.—It is the intention of this scheme of handicraft to suggest that exercise and work which will help towards giving to a girl just those traits of character the relative absence of which have made her dependent on a man’s help, when a little knowledge, resourcefulness, and self-reliance would have made her independent. At the same time it is hoped that it will give her really useful information and skill, which will help her to make her home more happy and comfortable, because she will be able to do then in a few minutes what she has had to spend money on, or ask some one else to do for her. It is not suggested that it should be considered the duty of a woman to do all the things mentioned, while the man sits down and looks on; only that she should be placed in a position to be able to do them, if necessity or convenience make it desirable from the point of view of her real benefit.

Suitability of the Work for Girls.—There are two questions that occur to one when considering this matter. In the first
place, is there any physical reason why a woman should not be able to act decisively, purposefully, and with as much confidence as a man within the limits of her strength? Secondly, is there any real reason for drawing such a hard-and-fast line between what is man’s work and what is woman’s work, to the disadvantage of the woman? I have failed to find as yet any psychologist who brings forward proof that, if a girl is given the same environment as a boy of equal strength of body, and is subjected to the same training and treatment, she cannot develop similar qualities of mind. Nature undoubtedly does make a difference, but, surely, if work of a particular kind makes for decisiveness and precision in the mind and action of a boy, tending to make him resourceful, self-reliant, and able to cope with new situations, as they arise, with a confidence that ensures a successful issue, then work of a like kind should have the same effect on the mind of a girl.

The objection has been raised that such work will tend to make a girl into a tom-boy, hard, unsympathetic, rude, and lacking in that grace which all wish so fervently to remain the permanent characteristic of womanhood. It will be hard to show, however, how such traits can be developed by such work as this. The skill and control of hand and body will not give them. The power to think, and decide on action, quickly and effectively, will also not be conducive to such, and surely the habit of planning and arranging one’s actions to secure a definite end need have no such effect. The habits of accuracy and of basing judgment on knowledge, formed only by work that demands accuracy and judgment for its successful issue, make for other characteristics. I can only say, from a considerable personal experience, that I know of no woman made less lovely, less womanly, or less kind and sympathetic as a consequence of being able to use a few tools effectively and well.

I would strongly urge, however, that it is not intended to turn women into incompetent men, or even competent ones. They should not be asked to do the hard, laborious work of the carpenter and joiner, or of the plumber. I would never ask a woman to rip down a three-inch plank, or cut a nine-inch tenon, or wipe a joint in a two-inch pipe. There will be no
Fig. 27.—CREASING PAPER WITH BONE FOLDER AGAINST STRAIGHT EDGE

Fig. 28.—CUTTING HARD PAPER OR CARD WITH KNIFE

Fig. 29.—CUTTING SOFT PAPER WITH KNIFE

Fig. 30.—PUNCHING HOLES FOR EYELETS
Fig. 31.—Bad position for face planing

Fig. 32.—Good position for face planing

Fig. 33.—Edge planing in vice

Fig. 34.—Use of spokeshave
mental gain from such work, unless the physical characteristics of the body are suitable, which is not the case with a woman. Real honest work there should be, but not of a kind to cause any injury or over-fatigue to the person.

Practical Value of the Training.—From the educational standpoint, then, the girl will be improved mentally by such training as we find in Domestic Handicraft. There is, however, another standpoint—that of utility. This in the minds of many should almost be excluded from consideration in an elementary school, and only affect plans when dealing with evening continuation and technical schools. But education surely is the preparation of individuals for their life's work, and, if they are to live their lives fully and joyously, they must be able to get their living with a minimum expenditure of life's energy. Moreover, every bit of training they undergo that enables them to get their living more easily will also give them greater opportunities for improvement and real life-living in the higher sense. Again, if it is possible to give a valuable education aiming at utility, without detriment to the humanistic or cultural side, it would be most unwise not to do so.

It is necessary, then, to consider for purposes of education what the future life of our girls will be. Probably some seventy-five per cent. will fulfil the noble function of wife and mother. Some of these will, no doubt, be richly endowed with this world's goods, and will not need to trouble about small items of expenditure, but by far the greater number will need to do so, and anything in their training that will enable them to save the pounds, shillings, and pence will be of real value. The training in cookery, laundry, and housewifery are all essential, and under modern conditions of life the power to make and mend articles of furniture, of ornament, and use, to attend to locks, taps, and other fittings, will be found no less valuable. Many articles may be bought ready-made at little more than the retail cost of the material, but only when hundreds are needed exactly alike. If the thing wanted is not quite like the common pattern, then the cost often puts it quite out of reach. The ability to make will then mean all the difference between comfort and discomfort. When repairs are considered, one finds that the cost is often quite out of
proportion to the work done. A washer for a scullery tap actually costs one halfpenny. Any one who knows how, can easily fit one; but one shilling is quite an ordinary charge for replacing, and justly so, for time taken by the workman in travelling must be considered. The full realisation of the value of the power to do such things will only be known by those who have the power to do for themselves, and have passed through the actual experience.

**Disciplinary Value.**—The question will now arise as to how the effect of this training received differs from that of the constructive work in dressmaking or cooking. I would answer that the difference arises from the nature of the material used. From actual experience with many materials, I am convinced that there is no one material, other than wood, which gives such a wide variety of disciplinary exercise, requires such delicate and varying muscular adjustments, such carefully preconceived orderly operations, which gives such valuable scope for varying degrees of accuracy within the understanding of ordinary individuals, and yet provides work which comes within the range of the physical strength of quite young children. Its general utility and cheapness are also factors in its favour for our purpose. What is there in dressmaking to compare with the discipline involved in the construction of a well-made half-lap joint in wood? A skirt band will give sufficiently to allow of adjustment to a lady’s waist within relatively considerable limits. An extra half-ounce of flour will make no perceptible difference in a loaf of bread. Not so with a difference of one-sixteenth in width of groove on a piece of wood. It is only the differences which have perceptible influence which educate. No two milliners will give you the same size for the interior measurement of the same hat, and half an inch will not make much difference in the fit on a good head of hair; but one-sixteenth of an inch will make all the difference between a useful and a useless dovetail joint in wood. Finally, what exercise in cooking or laundry work can compare with the decisiveness necessary for an effective shoulder cut with a tenon saw?

**Possible Objection.**—The objection that undesirable physical exertion is required will be found to be due, in nearly every case,
to the choice of unsuitable work, and to improper use of tools. Skill in the use of tools and proper adjustment will be found to do away with this almost entirely. The use of the handsaw and the larger planes is usually found to cause most fatigue. It would not be advisable to set girls to rip out long lengths of plank, or plane up wide boards. These can be obtained cut out and machine-planed at very trifling increase of cost, and part of the aim should be to obtain the best results with a minimum of unproductive labour.

The position of the body in work, and the use of its weight to assist the muscles, or even to do away largely with the strain on them, must be carefully studied. Leaning forward over the bench while standing at right angles to it, instead of maintaining an upright position behind the work with tool, arm, and shoulder in a vertical plane, is such a very bad practice, and so frequent, that it needs illustration to demonstrate effectively the advantage of the right method (see Fig. 31). In the first position the strain on the arm muscles is enormous and terribly fatiguimg, while in the second (Fig. 32) the muscles are almost at rest, as the thrust, caused by the weight coming forward, is taken up almost entirely by the bones themselves. Again with the head, if held horizontally for long at a time, great fatigue must result, but held vertically over the neck and spine, a much more restful position is obtained. In practically every case a good hygienic position of trunk, head, and limbs will be found most effective for work, as well as least tiring.

Tools. — The tools used should be cheap and easily obtained. Where tools improvised from objects in the home will serve, they should be used. A flat iron will make quite an efficient anvil; and a gas ring, found in most homes where gas is laid on, or costing only ninepence, can, if a piece of old iron plate is bent over it to reflect the heat, be made to heat soldering irons almost, if not quite, as effectively as a tinman's stove costing twelve or even fifteen shillings. Every home should possess a few ordinary tools, and when these are really used to good purpose, they occupy a much higher position than usual among the household gods, and have a proper place assigned to them, where they can be found when wanted.
For the subject to be of material value, it is necessary that the value of the product shall exceed that of the material used and the tools employed. It would be folly to spend five shillings on tools and materials for the purpose of making an object that will only cost as many pence, and a material gain should be apparent if the maximum amount of interest is to be present. Therefore costly or special tools will be out of place in such a course as proposed, because they will not usually be found in the homes of those taking the work.

Method of Treatment.—The greatest educational value is derived from work that can be done at home, where the real wants are felt and consequently the most earnest attention is paid to the processes; and unless the school work is brought within the limits of what can reasonably be done at home it will not be extended there at all. Further, the greatest educational value will be found not in the actual work done, but in the formation of habits which will cause a particular attitude of mind towards any problem presented. The method of attack upon all problems, and the teaching system, must therefore aim at forming a general habit of investigation of a problem, and determination of the steps needed to secure the end in view, not at learning how to make a particular thing, or to perform the particular task set in the schoolroom, except as a guide to the general solution of a problem. In every lesson the first step will be to bring home to the minds of the children or of those concerned that the work to be done is really wanted by them; that it is of real value in their everyday life, and that they will be the better for being able to do what is the subject of the lesson. This will form the introductory stage of the lesson, and the presentation should be by means of an example of the greatest familiarity. It cannot really touch their life too much. Its extension to other examples will be a matter of course, and where possible it is well for the members of a class each to take a different example of the same problem, that all may see its general application.

Age and Character of Pupils.—This question will bring us to the consideration of the age of the children who should take this work. I do not think it advisable to take it with children less than eleven or twelve years of age. It is better adapted to that