



Masterly Inactivity

with Charlotte Mason

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Masterly Inactivity
with
Charlotte Mason

by Sonya Shafer

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Introduction

We love our children. And we have great hopes for them. As Charlotte Mason so aptly put it, “People feel that they can bring up their children to be something more than themselves, that they ought to do so, and that they must.”

That’s why we homeschool. We want to give our children something more.

But because of that desire, we can easily fall into a trap. “We ought to do so much for our children, and are able to do so much for them, that we begin to think everything rests with us and that we should never intermit for a moment our conscious action on the young minds and hearts about us. Our endeavours become fussy and restless. We are too much with our children, ‘late and soon.’ We try to dominate them too much, even when we fail to govern, and we are unable to perceive that wise and purposeful letting alone is the best part of education.”

“Wait a minute, now, Charlotte,” you say. “‘Wise and purposeful letting alone’? Do you mean we shouldn’t discipline our children? Just let them run wild and hope they’ll turn out okay?”

That’s not what Charlotte meant at all. In fact, this concept of Masterly Inactivity, as she called it, is based on a strong foundation of authority. You, as the parent, have the authority. And the children should be keenly aware of that authority. There is no way you will be able to practice or enjoy Masterly Inactivity if you do not have that foundation in place.

Both words—Masterly Inactivity—are important. You must have control of your children and have your authority in place first (masterly) before you can practice wise passiveness (inactivity) in allowing them breathing room—room to explore, learn, and grow within your boundaries.

Practicing only the Masterly part will result in that fussy, restless spirit that Charlotte described. You’ll work yourself into a tizzy trying to control every single thing every single child does all day long (not to mention driving the children crazy)! But deciding to ignore your God-given authority and just be Inactive out of sheer laziness or selfishness will result in disaster.

You need both Masterly and Inactivity—in that order and in balance.

There’s so much more that Charlotte said about Masterly Inactivity! So these articles focus on its various aspects in the hope that this little study will restore balance and joy to both your parenting and teaching.

Masterly Inactivity

I remember two parties I attended when I was growing up. One was a sleepover at which I saw the parent only once: at breakfast. The rest of the time we girls were left to do anything and everything we pleased. And believe me, we did.

The other party was more like wearing a straitjacket. The parent in charge had every activity timed to the minute, and we were not allowed even an inch of freedom to elaborate on that schedule or alter any activity. That poor parent was so concerned and nervous about our time together that we were *all* soon irritated and nervous.

Two extremes. Between them is the happy state of Masterly Inactivity.

So what exactly is Masterly Inactivity? Charlotte unfolded its many facets by describing both what it is and what it is not. With each article we'll summarize those What It Is and What It Is Not phrases in a little box like the one you see on the next page. You can also find a complete list of all the Is and Is Not's on pages 44 and 45.

Masterly Inactivity “has nothing in common with the *laissez aller* attitude that comes of thinking ‘what’s the good?’ ” It is so easy to slip into that attitude of defeat. But defeat is not the same as Masterly Inactivity.

“And still further is it removed from the sheer indolence of mind that lets things go their way rather than take the trouble to lead them to any issue.” Indolence means laziness! Masterly Inactivity is not the same as allowing the children to run wild just because it requires effort to rein them in. It takes work and intentional decisions to raise children well.

Wordsworth used the phrase “wise passiveness” to emphasize what Masterly Inactivity is about. Note the word “wise.” Many parents exercise passiveness, but most times it is not wise.

Wisdom comes from insight. In fact, Charlotte pointed out that Masterly Inactivity should involve “insight and self-restraint.” Those two words are what were missing from the two parties I attended.

The first mom, who left us to do as we pleased, did not have insight into what we were thinking or desiring. Do you have insight into what your children are thinking and doing? If not, purpose to become a student of your child. Study him and learn what makes him tick.

The second mom, who ran the party like a drill sergeant, did not exercise self-restraint. Once the party was set up, she needed to restrain her natural tendency to dominate everything and just allow us to enjoy ourselves within the environment she had created.

Insight and self-restraint. Great qualities for a parent to have . . . or a party host.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Wise passiveness
- Insight and self-restraint

What It Is Not

- *Laissez aller* attitude (“what’s the good?”)
 - Indolence of mind (no direction)
- 

The Fence of Authority

A fenced-in backyard can be a wonderful thing when you have small children. Ask any mother who has spent a hot summer day chasing after her adventurous terrier and perpetually active toddler. Fences are good.

As parents, our “fence” of authority must be in place if we are ever going to be able to enjoy Masterly Inactivity. Charlotte Mason said, “The sense of authority is the *sine qua non* [essential] of the parental relationship, and I am not sure that without that our activities or our inactivity will produce any great results.”

Masterly Inactivity is not some quick fix that solves all our discipline problems. It is a perk enjoyed because we have already addressed discipline issues. We must establish the boundaries that will protect and nurture the children God has given us.

It is not our option to neglect or ignore those boundaries, because we ourselves are under God’s authority. We must obey His authority just as our children must obey our authority. Charlotte emphasized, “This element of strength is the backbone of our position.”

Without this fence in place, we relegate ourselves to a life of chasing, coaxing, bribing, and bartering. And we relegate our children to a life of guessing, second-guessing, pushing, and conniving.

When our children realize that it’s not a matter of Mommy’s doing whatever she wants to do but rather that Mommy can’t tear down the boundary because she has to obey God, they will learn what it means to be free.

As Charlotte explained, “They are free under authority, which is liberty; to be free without authority is license.” They are free to run about and explore within the secure boundaries of our fence. But they are not free to tear down the fence and run wild.

Once that issue is settled, they won’t have to spend all their time trying to whine and manipulate Mom into tearing down the fence. It is not Mom’s place under God to allow her child to disobey. She is on assignment from God and must do her duty. Mom and Dad’s authority is a non-negotiable.

So if you’re in the fence-building stage with little ones, mark the boundaries clearly, knowing that you are operating under God’s authority. Be faithful to establish your God-given authority now.

And if your little ones are now older and are questioning your authority, take heart. It’s not too late to repair that fence. Ask God for the right tools and go to work with a will.

Fences are good.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Based on a sense of authority
- Freedom under authority

What It Is Not

- Freedom without authority
- 

Charlotte Mason Quotes

on

Parenting

*F*ather and mother have no greater delight than to watch the individuality of their child unfold as a flower unfolds (Vol. 1, p. 4).



*E*very mother knows how intensely reasonable a child is and how difficult it is to answer his quite logical and foolishly wrong conclusions (Vol. 6, p. 150).



*N*othing is trivial that concerns a child; his foolish-seeming words and ways are pregnant with meaning for the wise (Vol. 1, p. 5).



*H*abit, in the hands of the mother, is as his wheel to the potter, his knife to the carver—the instrument by means of which she turns out the design she has already conceived in her brain (Vol. 1, p. 97).

It is a great thing to be a parent: there is no promotion, no dignity, to compare with it (Vol. 1, p. 1).



In this time of extraordinary pressure, educational and social, perhaps a mother's first duty to her children is to secure for them a quiet growing time, a full six years of passive receptive life, the waking part of it spent for the most part out in the fresh air (Vol. 1, p. 43).



There is nothing which a mother cannot bring her child up to (Vol. 1, p. 105).



The mother who takes pains to endow her children with good habits secures for herself smooth and easy days (Vol. 1, p. 136).



The mother has no more sacred duty than that of training her infant to instant obedience (Vol. 1, p. 162).

Good Humor

*H*ave you ever heard of the game Mother, May I? No, I don't mean the innocent little game of "baby steps" and "kangaroo hops." I mean the "game" of pestering and whining, "Mother, may I stay up late tonight? Pleeeeeze, please, please? All my friends are doing it and" Perhaps you played this game yourself with your mother.

Today you might see the same situation in homeschooling. "Mother, I don't have my assignment done. I know you said today is the deadline, but I need a couple more days to complete it."

Do you answer Yes or No? What factors go into making that decision? You know the difference in your child's voice whether he is cajoling and manipulating or respectfully presenting a request for his authority to consider. Your position as the authority can make all the difference.

Charlotte gave this example: " 'Oh, mother, may we go blackberrying this afternoon, instead of lessons?' The masterly 'yes' and the abject 'yes' are quite different notes. The first makes the holiday doubly a delight; the second produces a restless desire to gain some other easy victory."

You see, the parent whose authority is not securely in place thinks of this type of situation more as "giving in" than as granting a favor. A parent whose authority is secure knows that granting a favor will not affect her authority. She is still in charge. And she gets a little joy from being able to please her small ones in this way as a special treat.

Charlotte called this aspect of Masterly Inactivity "good

humour—frank, cordial, natural, good humour. This is quite a different thing from overmuch complacency, and a general giving-in to all the children’s whims. The one is the outcome of strength, the other of weakness, and children are very quick to see the difference.”

Next time your children want to play this kind of Mother, May I, ask yourself whether you feel like you are giving in to their demands. Are you just trying to make the whining stop, or are you afraid they won’t like you if you say No? That feeling is a signal that you are not operating from a position of Masterly Inactivity.

On the other hand, when your children ask, “Mother, May I?” do you feel like you are granting a favor from a secure position of benevolent authority? That’s the position that ensures good humor for both you and your children.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Frank, cordial, natural, good humor

What It Is Not

- Overmuch complacency
 - General giving-in to all the children’s whims
- 

Confidence as a Parent

Some things you just expect to work right. Take, for instance, that new washing machine you recently paid an arm and a leg for. You expect it to work, because you trust the company who created it.

On the other hand, some things you don't expect to work, because you know who created them. The cardboard-box washing machine your four-year-old just made with packing tape and colored markers, for example. You love him dearly, but you haven't returned that new washer yet.

It's the same with the parent-child relationship. God created it, and it works. You can depend on it.

It's easy to spot the parents who don't trust God's plan. They are the ones who are constantly in a tither. They fuss; they fret; they hover. And the poor children wonder whether the parent is supposed to be their buddy, their servant, or their taskmaster.

Charlotte described the beauty of the parent-child relationship and encouraged parents to have confidence in it: "The mere blessed fact of the parental relationship and of that authority which belongs to it, by right and by nature, acts upon the children as do sunshine and shower on a seed in good soil. But the fussy parent, the anxious parent, the parent who explains overmuch, who commands overmuch, who excuses overmuch, who restrains overmuch, who interferes overmuch, even the parent who is with the children overmuch, does away with the dignity and simplicity of that relationship."

"But," you may say, "there's no way I can have confidence as a parent. You don't know how much I've failed." Dear friend, failure in

the past does not condemn you to grovel before your children for the rest of your life. Move forward with confidence in God’s plan. Reject the lies that dog your thoughts and embrace these truths:

- God will never love me more than He does right now (Romans 8:37–39).

- God has forgiven me and removed my transgressions as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12).

- I have been chosen by the King of kings to teach and train these children (Deuteronomy 6:4–7).

- I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13).

- God is right beside me and He is never surprised (Hebrews 13:5, 6).

- God will direct me as I tune in to His still small voice (Galatians 5:25).

- His grace will be sufficient at just the second I need it (2 Corinthians 12:9).

- “In quietness and in confidence shall be your strength” (Isaiah 30:15).



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Confidence as a parent
- Dignity and simplicity

What It Is Not

- Fussy
 - Anxious
 - Overmuch explaining, restraining, interfering, commanding, excusing
 - Overmuch with the children
- 

More Charlotte Mason Quotes on Parenting

Every thoughtful mother invents a thousand ways of training in her child a just eye and a faithful hand (Vol. 1, p. 180).



Parents are very jealous over the individuality of their children; they mistrust the tendency to develop all on the same plan; and this instinctive jealousy is right (Vol. 2, p. 31).



It is more than anything else the home influences brought to bear upon the child that determine the character and career of the future man or woman (Vol. 1, p. 1).



Who shall fix limitations to the power of parents? (Vol. 2, p. 29).

The insight and love with which parents—mothers most so—are blest, is a divine gift which fills lookers-on with reverence (Vol. 2, p. 91).



It is as much the parent's duty to educate his child into moral strength and purpose and intellectual activity as it is to feed him and clothe him (Vol. 1, p. 103).



To put the child on the right track for the fulfilment of the possibilities inherent in him, is the vocation of the parent (Vol. 1, p. 109).



The individuality of parents is a great possession for their children (Vol. 2, Preface).



Be courteous, be candid, be grateful, be considerate, be true; there are aspects of duty enough to occupy the attention of mother and child for every day of the child-life (Vol. 1, p. 340).

A Good Deal of Letting Alone

When our first two children were still preschoolers, my husband took them to the park without me. I had some work to finish up, so they went ahead and walked the two blocks before me. About twenty minutes later I was done and hurried to join them. As I rounded the corner, I could see our youngest (at the time) climbing the leg of the swing set. She had almost reached the top bar about ten feet off the ground.

Images rushed frantically across my mind. I could see her slipping and falling to the ground; see her missing her grip and knocking out her front teeth on the post; see her sliding down the pole and getting a terrible skin “burn”; see her . . .

You know what I mean. We moms are so good at imagining those “what if’s.” In a way, that tendency is good. It helps us protect our young ones from potential danger instead of just cleaning up the mess afterward.

But the trick of Masterly Inactivity is to not communicate those thoughts to the children. We need to keep them to ourselves and stay calm. Keep an alert eye, yes. Insert a wise word of caution, sometimes. But not to the point of causing nervous anxiety.

Charlotte thought that mothers “should give their children the ease of a good deal of letting alone, and should not oppress the young people with their own anxious care.”

For many a mother, and especially a homeschooling mother, the children become her life. Though Charlotte was not a mother herself, she knew that “the mother is apt to be too much engrossed with her children.” Every waking moment is filled with their needs, their

ambitions, their faults, their strengths, their victories, their stomachaches, their macaroni and cheese. If we're not careful, we end up so focused on them that they start focusing on themselves too.

They become self-absorbed and anxious about their progress. "The small person of ten who wishes to know if her attainments are up to the average for her age, or he who discusses his bad habits with you and the best way of curing them, is displeasing, because one feels instinctively that the child is occupied with cares which belong to the parent only. The burden of their children's training must be borne by the parents alone. But let them bear it with easy grace and an erect carriage, as the Spanish peasant bears her water-jar."

As in all the areas of Masterly Inactivity, a balance is crucial. "The moral is, not that all mothers should be careless and selfish." But many children would benefit from a good deal of letting alone.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- A fine, easy way
- A good deal of letting alone
- Bearing the burden of child-training with easy grace

What It Is Not

- Oppressing the children with anxious care
 - Careless and selfish
 - Too much engrossed with the children
- 

Confidence in the Children

I started piano lessons when I was eight and had several teachers. One was uncertain about her own ability to teach and felt that she wasn't as qualified as others might be. Under her influence I learned some, but I also sloughed off practicing, and she excused it. Because she didn't have confidence in herself as a teacher, she didn't expect her students to excel.

The teacher I had after her, though, took for granted that I could excel and expected me to do whatever it took. She didn't deliver lectures or give me pep talks. She simply had an air about her that communicated "this is how it is" and "this is what you can do and will do." Because of her confidence, I flourished and accelerated in that environment.

Charlotte explained that the same is true for parents and children: "Not only confidence in themselves, but confidence in their children, is an element of the masterly inactivity."

Some mothers just "know" that they're going to do an awful job with their children and don't believe they can ever do as good of a job at parenting as Mrs. So-and-so does. And their lack of confidence carries over to the children. They excuse their children's disobedience and bad attitudes because they think, "I'm such a bad parent there's no way I can expect my child to do things right." Then the children pick up on that belief and act on it. "See, I told you I couldn't expect them to behave," the mother bemoans.

Other mothers show their lack of confidence in another way. They smother their children with excessive commands and plenty of warnings about failing. "Now, be careful when you clear the table."

Three seconds later, “Are you being careful? Don’t drop the plates.” Two seconds later, “That stack is too high; you’re going to drop those plates!” A second later, “Oh, be careful! They’re tipping!” By this time, the poor child is so nervous and frazzled that he does drop the plates. And the mother groans, “See, I told you he would drop them.”

In contrast to both attitudes, Charlotte encouraged parents to “Believe in the relation of parent and child, and trust the children to believe in it and fulfil it on their part. They will do so if they are not worried.” And if *you* are not worried.

Your children can do what they should. You can be confident of that.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Confidence in the children

What It Is Not

- Worrying the children
- 

More Charlotte Mason Quotes on Parenting

Get rid of the weeds and foster the flowers (Vol. 2, p. 87).



The parents' chief care is, that that which they supply shall be wholesome and nourishing, whether in the way of picture-books, lessons, playmates, bread and milk, or mother's love (Vol. 1, p. 5).



That he should take direction and inspiration from all the casual life about him, should make our poor words and ways the starting-point from which, and in the direction of which, he develops—this is a thought which makes the best of us hold our breath (Vol. 2, p. 37).



Every child has a natural interest in the living things about him which it is the business of his parents to encourage (Vol. 1, p. 58).

Parents know their children better than do others and for that reason believe in them more” (Vol. 6, p. 47).



Can any of us love like a little child? Father and mother, sisters and brothers, neighbours and friends, “our” cat and “our” dog, the wretchedest old stump of a broken toy, all come in for his lavish tenderness (Vol. 6, p. 43).



The duty of parents is to sustain a child’s inner life with ideas as they sustain his body with food. The child is an eclectic; he may choose this or that; therefore, in the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand, for thou knowest not which shall prosper, whether this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good (Vol. 2, p. 39).



The part of the mother or teacher in the early years (indeed, all through life) is to sow opportunities, and then to keep in the background, ready with a guiding or restraining hand only when these are badly wanted (Vol. 1, pp. 192, 193).

Don't Be Hoodwinked

You've seen them—parents who are hoodwinked by their children time and time again. Suzy is a little terror to the other children, pulling hair and pushing the little ones. But when her mom enters the scene just as a small boy is pushing back, Suzy dramatically falls to the ground and cries. Her uninformed mother runs to rescue her poor victim-daughter and declares the boy to be a bully!

Tommy is assigned to clean the bathroom, so he closes the door, turns on the water, and draws designs on the steamy mirror. After an appropriate amount of time, he wets the sponge, turns off the water, and puts the cleaning supplies back in the closet. He's counting on the fact that his mother always checks the sponge and not the dirty toilet.

The term “hoodwinked” has been around a long time. Back in the sixteenth century, wink meant “to close one's eyes” firmly, not just the quick open-and-shut that we think of today. And hoodwink meant to have one's eyes closed or covered by one's hood. Figuratively, today, it means to blind someone to the facts.

Charlotte cautioned, “A mother or father who can be hoodwinked is a person easy to reckon with in the mind of even the best child. For children are always playing a game—half of chance, half of skill; they are trying how far they can go.”

Now, maybe *your* children have never tried to hoodwink you, but most children make it a hobby at some time or other. Charlotte was not telling us to warily watch our children with a suspicious eye, never trusting them. Rather, in her balanced way, she was encouraging us

to be realistic in our confidence.

Remember, on page 20 we talked about having confidence in the children. Well, there's a difference between being confident and being gullible. And our children can spot that difference with their eyes shut. As Charlotte put it: "The mother who is not *up to* children is at their mercy."

How do you know if you're being hoodwinked? You might begin by asking your husband, a close relative, or a long-time friend. Anyone who spends a lot of time with you and your children should be able to shed some light on the subject. If they can't think of anything they've noticed, be thankful and continue with confidence. If, however, they hesitantly mention an area in which you might be deceived, prayerfully consider what they said and take steps to catch that lie and expose it.

For a child who goes through childhood successfully deceiving those in authority, will grow up to be hoodwinked himself.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Omniscient (at least, seems to be all-knowing)

What It Is Not

- Hoodwinked
- 

Be the Sphinx

A child from out-of-town recently came to visit at our house. She soon disappeared into the toy room with my two youngest. Since I didn't know this child very well, I decided to spend some time in the toy room myself. I quietly went to the computer in the corner and kept busy, but all the while with an eye and ear attentive to what was happening.

Soon the child suggested playing something that wasn't kind. My ears perked up, but I stayed in the background to hear how my child would reply. She courteously declined the invitation to play that scenario. The visiting child, however, persisted, asking repeatedly and in various ways. My daughter continued to decline courteously and soon left the room to do other things.

So the visiting child moved to my youngest child and repeated the invitation to her. That's when I stepped in. I knew that my youngest did not have the communication skills to understand what was being suggested, and I knew that the play being suggested would upset her if it were carried out. I calmly said in a quiet but firm voice, "I don't think that's the best way to play. Why don't you think of something else to play, please."

You have just read an example of what it means to be the sphinx. Charlotte described it like this: "She must see without watching, know without telling, be on the alert always, yet never obviously, fussily, so."

You see, Masterly Inactivity does not mean that we go merrily about our business, oblivious to what is going on in our children's lives. On the contrary, we are keenly aware of what is happening; we

just don't flaunt it. Masterly Inactivity means knowing when to intervene and when to "wait in the wings" for your cue.

So, why do I call this kind of posture "be the sphinx"? Because that's what Charlotte compared it to: "This open-eyed attitude must be sphinx-like in its repose."

To the children we seem to be simply sitting in the same room, yet all the time we are watching and listening, on the alert while reposing calmly. That's the sphinx.

It's much easier to be the frazzled-frenzied-fussy tourist who isn't sure if he's doing things right yet talks constantly, trying to direct everyone else.

The sphinx has an air of authority; the tourist has an air of uncertainty. The sphinx stays in the background until needed; the tourist blunders into the foreground and makes a nuisance of himself.

Be the sphinx.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- On the alert always, but not obviously so
- Open-eyed attitude
- Sphinx-like

What It Is Not

- Fussy
- 

More Charlotte Mason Quotes on Parenting

It is easy to give direction to the tendencies of a child; it is agonisingly difficult to alter the set of character in a man (Vol. 2, p. 209).



Every quality has its defect, every defect has its quality. Examine your child; he has qualities, he is generous; see to it that the lovable little fellow, who would give away his soul, is not also rash, impetuous, self-willed, passionate (Vol. 2, pp. 67, 68).



A mother or father who can be hoodwinked is a person easy to reckon with in the mind of even the best child (Vol. 3, p. 30).



Happy is the household that has few rules, and where “Mother does not like this,” and, “Father wishes that,” are all-constraining (Vol. 2, p. 18).

Mother or teacher cannot give children a better inheritance than the constant sense of being ruled and encompassed by law (Vol. 3, p. 129).



It rests with the parents of the child to settle for the future man his ways of thinking, behaving, feeling, acting; his disposition, his particular talent; the manner of things upon which his thoughts shall run (Vol. 2, p. 29).



Only at home can children be trained in the chivalrous temper of "proud submission and dignified obedience" (Vol. 2, p. 13).



We know that to form in his child right habits of thinking and behaving is a parent's chief duty. To nourish a child daily with loving, right, and noble ideas we believe to be the parent's next duty (Vol. 2, p. 228).

Freedom With a Sense of Must

As you've probably noticed by now, Masterly Inactivity is all about balance. It involves

- Passiveness, yet with a sense of wisdom;
- Authority, yet with a sense of humor;
- Letting alone, yet with a sense of insight;
- Confidence, yet with a sense of caution about being hoodwinked;
- Watchfulness, yet with a sense of repose.

Err too much on one side and you wander into a permissive minefield. Err too much on the other side and you set up camp as a dictator. Balance is the key.

If you have the right balance, your child will gain the right balance too. He will have freedom, yet with the sense of your authority behind it.

“This is the freedom which a child enjoys who has the confidence of his parents as to his comings and goings and childish doings, and who is all the time aware of their authority. . . . He has liberty, that is, with a sense of *must* behind it to relieve him of that unrest which comes with the constant effort of decision.”

You see, Charlotte believed that the effort of decision is the greatest effort in life. Think about it. You make hundreds of decisions each day, but you don't think twice about the ones that have become habits. It's those new decisions that require effort—weighing all the pros and cons, trying to determine possible consequences, coming up with new variations and approaches to the problem. Decisions can wear you out!

And the same is true for our children. Those who have no sense of authority to guide them are left to make all the decisions for themselves. But those who are raised with a sense of *must* are relieved from that effort and can enjoy their childhood years.

It's like wanting to plant a flower garden in the backyard but not knowing where the boundary line is. You spend so much energy researching, asking, pondering, guessing, and worrying about that property line that you don't have much left to create your garden.

But if you know where the boundary is, that's one less decision you have to mull over and muddle through. You can happily work within that guideline and spend your efforts designing the flowerbed of your dreams.

So give your children the benefit of liberty with a sense of *must* behind it. Build the fence of your authority and show them where the boundaries are, then give them freedom to roam and explore and create within that fence.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Constraining power, present but passive
- Liberty with a sense of *must* behind it
- Deterrent force in the background, watching to hinder the child when he would do wrong

What It Is Not

- Freedom to do wrong
- 

Go Out to Play!

*M*y parents were quite forbearing; I took violin lessons for a year or two. (If your child has ever started lessons on a violin, you know what I mean.) One thing my teacher emphasized from the first lesson was to make sure that I loosened the bow when I was done playing.

“If you keep the bow tight all the time, the constant tension will ruin it,” she explained.

Mothers are like violin bows. We tend to keep things tight: we run a tight ship, we keep to a tight schedule, and we soon develop tight shoulder muscles! It can be hard work to remain ever vigilant, yet not anxious; ever watchful, yet not fussy; ever mindful, yet not overbearing. We develop a fretful, tense, stressed mind-set that soon rubs off on the children.

Charlotte sympathetically explained, “She may be the best mother in the world, but the thing that her children will get from her in these vexed moods is a touch of her nervousness—most catching of complaints. She will find them fractious, rebellious, unmanageable, and will be slow to realise that it is her fault; not the fault of her act but of her state.”

The solution? We need to loosen the bow. Don’t we do that for our children when they are stressed out? We encourage them to take a little time to relax and regain their bearings. Why don’t we do the same for ourselves?

“If mothers could learn to do for themselves what they do for their children when these are overdone, we should have happier households. Let the mother go out to play! If she would only have courage to let

everything go when life becomes too tense, and just take a day, or half a day, out in the fields, or with a favourite book, or in a picture gallery looking long and well at just two or three pictures, or in bed, *without the children*, life would go on far more happily for both children and parents. The mother would be able to hold herself in ‘wise passiveness,’ and would not fret her children by continual interference, even of hand or eye—she would let them be.”

Maybe your idea of play is different from Charlotte’s suggestions, but the principle remains: go out to play! For the sake of your own sanity and your children, take some time to relax and recharge your batteries. Do something that you enjoy doing, and do it without the children. Yes, it may take some schedule juggling on your part to make it happen, but you always figure out a way to rearrange plans if you think something’s necessary. This is necessary!

Loosen that bow before it’s ruined. Go out to play!



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Always serene
- Wise passiveness

What It Is Not

- Nervous, anxious, worried
 - Continual interference
- 

More Charlotte Mason Quotes on Parenting

To give reasons to a child is usually out of place, and is a sacrifice of parental dignity; but he is quick enough to read the “must” and “ought” which rule her, in his mother’s face and manner, and in the fact that she is not to be moved from a resolution on any question of right and wrong (Vol. 1, pp. 15, 16).



His parents are as God to the little child; and, yet more constraining thought, God is to him what his parents are (Vol. 2, p. 14).



Authority is that aspect of love which parents present to their children; parents know it is love, because to them it means continual self-denial, self-repression, self-sacrifice: children recognise it as love, because to them it means quiet rest and gaiety of heart (Vol. 3, p. 24).



The sense of must should be present with children; our mistake is to act in such a way that they, only, seem to be law-compelled while their elders do as they please (Vol. 6, p. 73).

If mothers could learn to do for themselves what they do for their children when these are overdone, we should have happier households. Let the mother go out to play! (Vol. 3, p. 33).



Authority is just and faithful in all matters of promise-keeping; it is also considerate, and that is why a good mother is the best home-ruler (Vol. 3, p. 23).



Let everything go when life becomes too tense, and just take a day, or half a day, out in the fields, or with a favourite book, or in a picture gallery looking long and well at just two or three pictures, or in bed, without the children (Vol. 3, p. 33).



The labour of the mother who sets herself to understand her work is not increased, but infinitely lightened (Vol. 2, p. 91).



How many times a day does a mother lift up her heart to God as she goes in and out amongst her children, and they never know! (Vol. 2, p. 55).

This page may look a little different from the others in this book. That's because I wanted to show you what a page without margin looks like. See how the words go from one edge clear across to the other edge with no white space around them? How does reading this paragraph make you feel? Are you enjoying reading this section? Would you like the whole page to look like this? I, for one, get tense when I have to read something with no margin. Now let's talk about margin in your life.

The Leisure of Margin

Ah, that's better. Now we have space to relax. The same is needful in life. Many of us have schedules that look like that crowded paragraph above. One event follows closely on the heels of the next with little space in between. We have no time to take a deep breath, let alone relax! Our events fill our days from morning to night, sometimes doubled up. Charlotte put it this way: "Sometimes events hurry us, and sometimes—is it not true?—we like the little excitement of a rush."

But understand this: a life without margin is the enemy of Masterly Inactivity. For it is when we are pressed for time that we most easily become anxious and fretful. Sometimes the cause is outside activities, but sometimes we bring it on ourselves.

You may find this little scenario familiar: "Friends are coming, or the family wardrobe for the summer must be seen to, or drawers and cupboards must be turned out, or an examination is at hand. Anyway, it is one of those fussy, busy days which we women rather delight in. We do more than we can ourselves, our nerves are 'on end,' what with the fatigue and what with the little excitement, and everybody in the house or the school is uncomfortable. Again, the children take

advantage, so we say; the real fact being that they have caught their mother's mood and are fretful and tiresome.”

Those are the situations in which we most often push, prod, and pull the children along instead of giving them space to grow. It's so easy to allow that space to be

crowded out. Somehow we think that we're bad mommies if we're not on the go all the time. But the opposite is true. The good mommies make sure they protect that margin for their children and themselves, because “Leisure for themselves and a sense of leisure in those about them is

as necessary to children's well being, as it is to the strong and benign parental attitude of which I am speaking.”

Our children need space to grow, to explore, and to be.

We can't give them space if we have no margin.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Sense of leisure (margin)
- Strong, benign parental attitude

What It Is Not

- Busy, fatigued
- 

Faith

What do you try to control instead of allowing God to control?” the small-group leader posed the question. He gave an example. Then someone else mentioned an area that hit home: “I try to control everything for my children,” she said. “My natural instinct is to protect them, but I tend to micromanage. For instance, I tell my teenage daughter to text me when she arrives somewhere, text me when she’s leaving, text me when she arrives at the next place. You get the idea.”

Yes, I got the idea. My mommy-heart tends to micromanage in a different way; it wants to make sure that my children aren’t put into any potentially hard circumstances. If some situation or conversation might make them feel uncomfortable or awkward, I try to derail it or intercept it instead of trusting that our loving God is working in their lives just as He is working in mine—through good times and hard times.

We’ve talked about confidence throughout these articles, so we cannot end without saying a word about faith: “That highest form of confidence, known to us as faith, is necessary to full repose of mind and manner.”

The only reason we can enjoy Masterly Inactivity is because of faith—faith that it’s not all dependent on us as parents; faith that God is at work.

“When we recognise that God does not make over the bringing up of children absolutely even to their parents, but that He works Himself, in ways which it must be our care not to hinder, in the training of every child, then we shall learn passiveness, humble and wise.”

We are not in this child-training business alone. God has assigned us to the task and given us the children He determined—with all their qualities and faults. But He has not left us alone to toil and guess and worry; God is working alongside us.

Yes, some lessons may be hard. Our mommy-hearts might groan at the thought of our children having to walk through an uncomfortable season. Our hearts might ache when our children are required to wait for something that they really desire or when they have something that they love removed from their lives. We want to control everything that happens to them.

And yet, Masterly Inactivity, at its deepest root, is trusting our Heavenly Father with these children whom He has lent to us for a time. Because the reality is that we *can't* control everything that happens to our children all the time. Only God can do that.

God is good and He is in control. Grab ahold of that fact and hang on with both hands.

Lord, increase our faith.



Masterly Inactivity

What It Is

- Faith in God
- Passiveness—humble and wise

(Remember that you can see a complete list of all that Masterly Inactivity is and is not on pages 44 and 45.)



More Charlotte Mason Quotes on Parenting

Nobody knows better than the wise mother the importance of giving a child time to collect himself for a decisive moment (Vol. 3, p. 22).



Mothers and fathers do not well to forget that their children are, by the very order of Nature, their disciples (Vol. 2, pp. 66, 67).



What do parents sow? Ideas (Vol. 2, p. 29).



There are mistaken parents, ignorant parents, a few indifferent parents; even, as one in a thousand, callous parents; but the good that is done upon the earth is done, under God, by parents, whether directly or indirectly (Vol. 2, pp. 50, 51).

It is as the mother gets wisdom liberally from above, that she will be enabled for this divine task (Vol. 1, p. 348).



The wonder that Almighty God can endure so far to leave the very making of an immortal being in the hands of human parents is only matched by the wonder that human parents can accept this divine trust with hardly a thought of its significance (Vol. 1, p. 333).



A mother knows how to speak of God as she would of an absent father with all the evidences of his care and love about her and his children (Vol. 6, p. 159).



Think of the joy of the mother who should overhear her little child murmuring over the first primrose of the year, "Dear God, you are too good!" (Vol. 2, p. 56).



Childhood—save the word! (Vol. 2, p. 155).

Masterly Inactivity *Is . . .*

- Wise and purposeful letting alone
- Wise passiveness
- Insight and self-restraint
- Based on a sense of authority
- Freedom under authority
- Frank, cordial, natural, good humor
- Confidence as a parent
- Dignity and simplicity
- A fine, easy way
- A good deal of letting alone
- Bearing the burden of child-training with easy grace
- Confidence in the children
- Omniscient (at least, seems to be all-knowing)
- On the alert always, but not obviously so
- Open-eyed attitude
- Sphinx-like
- Constraining power, present but passive
- Liberty with a sense of *must* behind it
- Deterrent force in the background, watching to hinder the child when he would do wrong
- Always serene
- Sense of leisure (margin)
- Strong, benign parental attitude
- Faith in God
- Passiveness—humble and wise

Masterly Inactivity Is Not . . .

- Fussy
- Restless
- Dominating
- *Laisser aller* attitude (“what’s the good?”)
- Indolence of mind (no direction)
- Freedom without authority
- Overmuch complacency
- General giving-in to all the children’s whims
- Anxious
- Overmuch explaining, restraining, interfering, commanding, excusing
- Overmuch with the children
- Oppressing the children with anxious care
- Careless and selfish
- Too much engrossed with the children
- Worrying the children
- Hoodwinked
- Freedom to do wrong
- Nervous, anxious, worried
- Continual interference
- Busy, fatigued

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for your family and homeschool,
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Do you ever feel like you're on the Mommy See-saw?

"I must teach my child to obey, yet I don't want to be a dictator."

*"I want my child to enjoy his childhood, but I can't just allow him to run wild
and do anything he wants to do."*

*Welcome to the Mommy See-saw. Up and down, back and forth
we teeter, wishing we knew the secret to keeping a happy balance.
Charlotte Mason called that happy balanced state Masterly Inactivity.
These Masterly Inactivity articles will help you*

- *Discover wise and purposeful letting alone*
- *Check that your fence of authority is in place*
- *Learn when to grant favors and when to stand firm*
- *Find out about the game that all children play*
- *Increase your confidence as a parent*

*Learn how to keep a happy balance in your home—
the balance of Masterly Inactivity.*

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