

*Simply Charlotte Mason presents*

# Laying Down the Rails

SAMPLE

A CHARLOTTE MASON  
HABITS HANDBOOK

by **Sonya Shafer**

# *Discover the secret to smooth and easy days!*

*The mother who takes pains to endow her children with good habits  
secures for herself smooth and easy days.*—Charlotte Mason

Charlotte likened good habits to rails on which our children's lives could run smoothly. It is the parent's business to lay down those rails.

Here, compiled into one volume, are all the habits Charlotte mentioned in her writings with her thoughts and suggestions for cultivating each one. This work also includes Charlotte's help for breaking bad habits, hundreds of inspiring quotes, and lots of practical tips.

**Complete**—Details more than fifty CM habits with their corresponding passages from Charlotte's writings, as well as her thoughts on the importance of habits.

**Practical**—Presents Charlotte's writings in bite-size chunks with summary statements and quick personal review questions. Modern-day examples offer additional insight into applying CM principles today.

**Encouraging**—Motivates and inspires you with wonderful quotes from Charlotte Mason and many other great men and women of history, like Helen Keller, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, William Shakespeare, Ralph Waldo Emerson, C. S. Lewis, Thomas Edison, and more!

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*"I return again and again to this book, all underlined and dog-eared."*

Ann Voskamp, author of *A Child's Geography*

*"I consider this work to be indispensable and will recommend it to all home schooling parents."*

Catherine Levison, author of *A Charlotte Mason Education*

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## Chapter 3

# *Decency and Propriety Habits*

Habits of Decency and Propriety refer to those habits that we should instill in a child so he will not be “a social outcast” (Vol. 6, p. 101). Charlotte believed that a child would learn most of these character traits as he lived in an atmosphere that was permeated with them. In other words, we should try to make these habits a natural part of our homes.

“The whole group of habitudes, half physical and half moral, on which the propriety and comfort of everyday life depend, are received passively by the child; that is, he does very little to form these habits himself, but his brain receives impressions from what he sees about him; and these impressions take form as his own very strongest and most lasting habits. Cleanliness, order, neatness, regularity, punctuality, are all ‘branches’ of infant education. They should be about the child like the air he breathes, and he will take them in as unconsciously” (Vol. 1, pp. 124, 125).

“Every look of gentleness and tone of reverence, every word of kindness and act of help, passes into the thought-environment, the very atmosphere which the child breathes; he does not think of these things, may never think of them, but all his life long they excite that ‘vague appetency towards something’ out of which most of his actions spring” (Vol. 2, p. 36).

In this chapter you will find Charlotte’s comments on

<b>Cleanliness</b>	<b>Modesty and Purity</b>
<b>Courtesy</b>	<b>Neatness</b>
<b>Kindness</b>	<b>Order</b>
<b>Manners</b>	<b>Regularity</b>

Plus several more habits that Charlotte mentioned but didn’t elaborate on.

<b>Candor</b>	<b>Meekness</b>
<b>Courage</b>	<b>Patience</b>
<b>Diligence</b>	<b>Respect for Other People</b>
<b>Fortitude</b>	<b>Temperance</b>
<b>Generosity</b>	<b>Thrift</b>
<b>Gentleness</b>	

“Cleanliness, order, neatness, regularity, punctuality, are all ‘branches’ of infant education. They should be about the child like the air he breathes, and he will take them in as unconsciously.”

## Notes

“Character is the result not merely of the great ideas which are given to us, but of the habits which we labour to form upon those ideas.”

# Cleanliness

## *Careful to keep clean*

Michelle unconsciously braced herself as she unlocked the door to the condominium. They had rented this place without seeing it, and she was not quite sure what to expect. Some of the past vacation rental units had been less than stellar.

But as Michelle swung open the door, a fresh, clean smell enveloped her and seemed to invite her in. She could feel her shoulder muscles relaxing after that long drive and knew that a smile was playing on her lips as she stepped inside and looked around the sparkling clean room. Yes, this was going to be a wonderful place to call “home” for the next few days!

Isn't it amazing how much effect cleanliness has on our frame of mind? People who are used to a clean, fresh-smelling environment quickly notice when those elements are missing. Take for an example, what happens to your spirits when you open the door after the baby's nap and meet full force the odor of a dirty diaper, followed by the sight of a new “finger painting” spread around the walls and crib. Cleanliness matters!

Fortunately, cleanliness is a habit that we can cultivate in our children by example and surroundings, for the most part. We don't have to be paranoid about germs or compulsive about scrubbing, but we can intentionally create a fresh, clean environment in our homes for our children (and us) to enjoy.

### Charlotte's Thoughts on Cleanliness

#### *1. Keep your child's room clean, aired, and odor-free.*

“It is hardly necessary to say a word about the necessity for delicate cleanliness in the nursery. . . . It needs much watchfulness to secure that there shall not be the faintest odour about the infant or anything belonging to him, and that the nurseries be kept sweet and thoroughly aired” (Vol. 1, p. 125).

#### *2. Teach your child to air out any clothing or bedding that will be used again before washing.*

“One or two little bits of tidiness that nurses affect are not to be commended on the score of cleanliness:—the making up of the nursery beds early in the morning, and the folding up of the children's garments when they take them off at night. It is well to stretch a line across the day nursery at night, and hang the little garments out for an airing, to get rid of the insensible perspiration with which they have been laden during the day. For the same reason, the beds and bedclothes should be turned down to air for a couple of hours before they are made up” (Vol. 1, p. 126).

#### *3. Allow your child to get dirty, but teach him how to clean himself up.*

“The children, too, should be encouraged to nice cleanliness in their own persons. We have all seen the dainty baby-hand stretched out to be washed; it has got a smudge, and the child does not like it. May they be as particular when they

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are big enough to wash their own hands! Not that they should be always clean and presentable; children love to ‘mess about’ and should have big pinafores for the purpose. They are all like that little French prince who scorned his birthday gifts, and entreated to be allowed to make dear little mud-pies with the boy in the gutter. Let them make their mud-pies freely; but that over, they should be impatient to remove every trace of soil, and should do it *themselves*” (Vol. 1, p. 127).

**4. Teach your child how to groom himself adequately and to wash his hands before meals.**

“Young children may be taught to take care of their finger-nails, and to cleanse the corners of eyes and ears. As for sitting down to table with unwashed hands and unbrushed hair, that, of course, no decent child is allowed to do” (Vol. 1, p. 127).

**5. By the age of five or six, your child should be able to bathe himself properly.**

“Children should be early provided with their own washing materials, and accustomed to find real pleasure in the bath, and in attending to themselves. There is no reason why a child of five or six should not make himself thoroughly clean without all that torture of soap in the eyes and general pulling about and poking which children hate, and no wonder. Besides, the child is not getting the *habit* of the daily bath until he can take it for himself” (Vol. 1, p. 127).

## Questions to Ask about Cleanliness

- Am I careful to air my child’s room?
- Do I try to keep my child’s room smelling sweet and fresh, or do I make excuse because of the child’s gender, age, or hobbies?
- Am I enlisting my older child’s help in keeping his own room (and the rest of the house) clean and fresh?
- Am I teaching my child to air out clothing and bedding that will be used again before washing?
- Do I allow my child to get dirty and clean himself up?
- Do I consistently require washed hands for family meals?
- Am I teaching my child to groom himself adequately, including caring for his fingernails, cleaning in the “corners,” and brushing or combing his hair?
- Am I taking steps to teach my child how to attend to himself in his bath or shower?

## More Quotes on Cleanliness

“Certainly this is a duty, not a sin. ‘Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.’”—John Wesley

“Cleanness of body was ever deemed to proceed from a due reverence to God, to society, and to ourselves.”—Francis Bacon

“Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.”

## Notes

*You can also set a good example by being courteous to others, including your child. (When you tell your child to do something, do you say “please” and “thank you”?)*

**“To listen with all one’s mind is an act of delicate courtesy.”**

## Courtesy

*Behavior marked by respect for and consideration of others*

“Say ‘please,’” Karen prompted her little one, holding the banana piece in the baby’s line of vision.

“Pees,” the little one replied.

Karen smiled and handed the piece of banana to the child. The chubby little hand reached out and grasped the fruit. Karen did not let go, despite the baby-tugs she felt.

“Thank you,” she prompted pleasantly, still holding on to the banana.

“Tanku,” repeated the child.

“Very good!” Karen encouraged, and let go of the treat.

Courtesy seems like a small thing—until we encounter rudeness. Then we realize what a difference simple courtesy can make! The good news is that, like so many other habits of Decency and Propriety, your child can learn courtesy by living in a courteous environment and receiving some simple coaching from you.

### Charlotte’s Thoughts on Courtesy

***1. Do not allow your child to neglect showing courtesy just because a person is familiar to him. Familiarity should not breed disrespect.***

“We English people are rather ready to think that it does not much matter how we behave, so long as our hearts are all right; and some of us miss our chance of doing the Kindness of Courtesy, and adopt a hail-fellow-well-met manner, which is a little painful and repellent, and therefore a little unkind” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 100).

“We owe knowledge to the ignorant, comfort to the distressed, healing to the sick, reverence, courtesy and kindness to all men, especially to those with whom we are connected by ties of family or neighbourhood; and the sense of these dues does not come by nature” (Vol. 3, p. 85).

“To listen with all one’s mind is an act of delicate courtesy which draws their best out of even dull people” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 76).

“So of the other manifestations of love—kindness, courtesy, friendliness; these the parents must get from their children, not upon demand, but as love constrains them. Make occasions for services, efforts, offerings: let the children feel that their kindness is a power in the lives of their parents. I know of a girl upon whom it dawned for the first time, when she was far in her ‘teens,’ that she had any power to gratify her mother. Do not let the little common courtesies and attentions of daily life slip,—the placing of a chair, the standing aside or falling behind at proper times, the attentive eye at table, the attentive ear and ready response to



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question or direction. Let the young people feel that the omission of these things causes pain to loving hearts, that the doing of them is as cheering as the sunshine; and if they forget sometimes, it will only be that they forget, not that they are unwilling, or look upon the amenities of life as ‘all bosh!’

“Again, let there be a continuous flow of friendliness, graciousness, the pleasantness of eye and lip, between parent and child. Let the boy perceive that a bright eye-to-eye ‘Good-morning, mother,’ is gladness to her, and that a cold greeting with averted face is like a cloud between his mother and the sun” (Vol. 5, pp. 202, 203).

### *2. Encourage your child to give and return courteous gestures, such as shaking hands and waving.*

“We miss, too, the courtesies of gesture; it is good in a German or Danish town to see one errand-boy raise his hat to another, or school-boy to school-boy, or porter to laundress, without any sense of awkwardness; but in these matters we have got into a national bad habit. In this field, perhaps, the rich and the poor meet together, because there is not in either an unconscious struggle after social status which does not belong to them, and so both can afford to be simple, considerate, gracious, and courteous to all who come in their way” (Vol. 4, Book 1, p. 100).

## Questions to Ask about Courtesy

- Is my child demonstrating courtesy consistently, even to familiar people like close friends and relatives?
- Is my child learning to give and return courteous gestures, like shaking hands and waving?
- Am I setting a good example by exhibiting courtesy on the telephone and in person?
- Am I trying to be courteous to my child?

## More Quotes on Courtesy

“Politeness is the art of choosing among one’s real thoughts.”—Abel Stevens

“Life is not so short but that there is always time for courtesy.”—Ralph Waldo Emerson

“If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world.”—Francis Bacon

## Kindness

### *Friendly regard shown toward another*

It had been a long week. The baby was just beginning to keep some food down after battling the flu for several days. The house was a mess: dishes, toys,

“We know that to form in his child right habits of thinking and behaving is a parent’s chief duty, and that this can be done for every child definitely and within given limits of time.”

## Laying Down the Rails Checklist

Charlotte encouraged parents to be intentional about developing habits in their children's lives. She more than once mentioned the idea of having a record of habits that you want to cultivate in each child, and keeping track of his or her progress. Birthdays make good milestones for regular evaluations and plans. "Obedience in the first year, and all the virtues of the good life as the years go on; every year with its own definite work to show in the training of character. Is Edward a selfish child when his fifth birthday comes? The fact is noted in his parents' year-book, with the resolve that by his sixth birthday he shall, please God, be a generous child" (Vol. 2, p. 65).

This checklist is given to help you be intentional about laying down the rails of the habits in this book. There is also space for you to evaluate your own progress, since many of Charlotte's comments are directed toward the parent more than the child. Suggestions that would apply only to a parent, not to a child, have X's in the children's boxes, leaving only the parent's box open. All the other suggestions can apply to both parents and children.

Feel free to duplicate this checklist as many times as you need. I hope it will be a trusty tool as you lay down the rails.

<b>Habits</b>	<i>Me</i>					
<b><i>Decency and Propriety Habits</i></b>						
<b><i>Cleanliness (p. 28)</i></b>						
Own room is aired.						
Own room smells sweet and fresh.						
Keeps own room (and the rest of the house) clean and fresh.						
Airs out clothing and bedding that will be used again before washing.						
Isn't afraid to get dirty; cleans self up.						
Washes hands for family meals.						
Grooms self adequately, including fingernails and hair.						
Attends to self in bath or shower.						
<b><i>Courtesy (p. 30)</i></b>						
Demonstrates courtesy consistently, even to familiar people.						
Gives and returns courteous gestures.						
Exhibits courtesy on the telephone and in person.						
Courteous to child/parent.						
<b><i>Kindness (p. 31)</i></b>						
Thinks the best of other people.						

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