

Using the Mind vs. Feeding the Mind

By Sonya Shafer

My husband has been working on a retaining wall in our backyard. The ground slopes down to a wooded creek, and over the years erosion has become a problem as the trees have blocked the sun and the grass has disappeared back there.

He's been working hard. In Georgia heat. And every so often he comes into the kitchen to get more water or a snack to fuel his body. It would get harder and harder to use his muscles if they were not fed.

You've probably experienced the same thing. Maybe you got busy or were in a hurry and forgot to eat. At some point you noticed that you were having a hard time concentrating and were feeling a bit weak and wobbly. That's when you personally realized the truth: you can't continue to use your body without feeding it.

The same principle holds true for the mind. It's all too easy to focus on using the mind during schoolwork but neglect to feed it.

This statement from one of Charlotte Mason's book on education is what got me thinking about using the mind vs. feeding it:

"To use the mind is by no means the same thing as to feed it" (A Philosophy of Education, p. 288).

What's the difference? Try these typical school exercises.

First, match each word to its definition.

___ mind

___ feed

___ use

- A. To employ as a means of accomplishing a purpose or achieving a result.
- B. To supply with food.
- C. The element of a person that enables him to be aware, to think, and to feel.

Next, answer these questions.

What is a two-letter preposition that is a homonym of two and too?

What is the meaning of the English idiom “by no means”?

Third, solve this puzzle:

List seven words that can be made from the letters in thing.

Now, how does your mind feel? I think you will agree that you were using it. It was working to output the correct answers. But was it being nourished by anything? Was it taking in any good, “healthful” ideas to replenish it, help you grow as a person, shape who you are becoming?

All of those words you were dealing with can be found in Charlotte’s statement:

“To use the mind is by no means the same thing as to feed it” (A Philosophy of Education, p. 288).

Reading that quote feeds the mind.

The Difference

I think that’s the difference. One of Charlotte’s main principles is that “the mind feeds on ideas.” So when our students are dealing with bare facts—whether studying them, memorizing them, practicing them, or recalling them—they’re using their minds. When they are dealing with ideas—living ideas that touch the emotions and fire the imagination—they’re feeding their minds.

In a Charlotte Mason education—one that embraces Charlotte’s principles and uses her methods—the student is continually taking in nourishing ideas even as he works with the facts contained within them. It is a balanced and natural approach, much more so than just using the mind without feeding it.

As I pondered the living idea found in Charlotte’s statement, I began to wonder which school-type activities use the mind and which feed the mind. So I started two lists. Here is what I have so far; see what you think.

Use the mind by

- memorizing facts;
- recalling facts in answer to questions;
- practicing a math formula;
- drilling math facts in a timed test;
- doing word-search puzzles;
- competing in spelling bees;

- changing punctuation on deliberately incorrect sentences;
- learning physical skills to perform for a trade;
- coloring, cutting, and pasting according to a predefined kit or sample;
- playing problem-solving games on the computer;
- copying definitions for a list of words.

Feed the mind by

- reading books full of living ideas, not just dry facts;
- listening to good, noble, beautiful thoughts in poetry;
- spending time in God’s creation, carefully looking and listening;
- listening to good music with focused attention;
- looking closely at great works of art;
- applying math truths to relevant, everyday situations;
- discovering spelling and punctuation through great literature;
- memorizing and reciting Scripture, hymn lyrics, and great poetry;
- singing great songs and hymns;
- providing role models with good habits and character;
- presenting principles, not ready-made opinions.

As I read over that first list (Use the mind), it reminded me of what school was like for me growing up and, sadly, what it is like for many students today. They are kept busy exercising their brains, but rarely do they receive the nourishment their minds need in order to grow and flourish.

Don’t get stuck in that first list. True education includes much opportunity for feeding and for growth. Don’t be guilty of underfeeding. Make sure you provide ample nourishment for your students’ minds.

“To use the mind is by no means the same thing as to feed it.”