# Children and Civic Education

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

*Probably the most important text the Enlightenment produced on the education of children, Rousseau's Emile (1762) is a landmark in the discovery of childhood as a special stage of life with its "own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling." Rousseau was also one of the earliest advocates of state-sponsored public education. In the second selection, from his Discourse on Political* Economy *(1758), he insists that only when education is a civic responsibility will citizens be turned from love of self to public spirit.*

*Reasoning should not begin too soon*—Locke's great maxim was that we ought to reason with children, and just now this maxim is much in fashion. I think, however, that its success does not warrant its reputation, and I find nothing more stupid than children who have been so much reasoned with. Reason, apparently a compound of all other faculties, the one latest developed, and with most difficulty, is the one proposed as agent in unfolding the faculties earliest used! The noblest work of education is to make a reasoning man, and we expect to train a young child by making him reason! This is beginning at the end; this is making an instrument of a result. If children understood how to reason they would not need to be educated. But by addressing them from their tenderest years in a language they cannot understand, you accustom them to be satisfied with words, to find fault with whatever is said to them, to think themselves as wise as their teachers, to wrangle and rebel. And what we mean they shall do from reasonable motives we are forced to obtain from them by adding the motive of avarice, or of fear, or of vanity.

Nature intends that children shall be children before they are men. If we insist on reversing this order we shall have fruit early indeed, but unripe and tasteless, and liable to early decay; we shall have young savants and old children. Childhood has its own methods of seeing, thinking, and feeling. Nothing shows less sense than to try to substitute our own methods for these. I would rather require a child ten years old to be five feet tall than to be judicious. Indeed, what use would he have at that age for the power to reason? It is a check upon physical strength, and the child needs none.

In attempting to persuade your pupils to obedience you add to this alleged persuasion force and threats, or worse still, flattery and promises. Bought over in this way by interest, or constrained by force, they pretend to be convinced by reason. They see plainly that as soon as you discover obedience or disobedience

in their conduct, the former is an advantage and the latter a disadvantage to them. But you ask of them only what is distasteful to them; it is always irksome to carry out the wishes of another, so by stealth they carry out their own. They are sure that if their disobedience is not known they are doing well; but they are ready, for fear of greater evils, to acknowledge, if found out, that they are doing wrong. As the reason for the duty required is beyond their capacity, no one can make them really understand it. But the fear of punishment, the hope of forgiveness, your importunity, their difficulty in answering you, extort from them the confession required of them. You think you have convinced them, when you have only wearied them out or intimidated them.

What results from this? First of all that, by imposing upon them a duty they do not feel as such, you set them against your tyranny, and dissuade them from loving you; you teach them to be dissemblers, deceitful, willfully untrue, for the sake of extorting rewards or of escaping punishments. Finally, by habituating them to cover a secret motive by an apparent motive, you give them the means of constantly misleading you, of concealing their true character from you, and of satisfying yourself and others with empty words when their occasion demands. You may say that the law, although binding on the conscience, uses constraint in dealing with grown men. I grant it; but what are these men but children spoiled by their education? This is precisely what ought to be prevented. With children use force, with men reason; such is the natural order of things. The wise man requires no laws....

Nothing is more uncertain than the life span of individual man; very few men reach old age. The greatest risks are incurred at the beginning of life: the less we have lived the less we may expect to live. Of the children that are born half at most grow to adolescence; thus it is probable that your pupil will not attain the age of manhood.

What must we think then of the barbarous education which sacrifices the present for an uncertain future, which surrounds a child with all sorts of fetters and begins by making him wretched in order to prepare him for a hypothetical future happiness that he will probably never live to enjoy? Even if I supposed this educational objective to be reasonable, how could I behold without indignation poor unfortunates bowed beneath an insupportable yoke and condemned like galley-slaves to perpetual labor, with no assurance that all this attention will ever be of service to them? The age of gaiety is passed over amid tears, chastisement, threats and slavery. We torment the poor child for his own good and do not see that we are summoning death, which will seize him in the midst of this sad business. Who knows how many children perish the victims of a father's or tutor's extravagant wisdom? Happy to escape their cruelty, the only advantage children derive from the ills they have been made to suffer is to die without regretting life, of which they have tasted only the sorrows.

Men, be humane, that is your first duty: be so for all conditions, all ages, all that is germane to man. What does wisdom avail you except as it concerns humanity? Cherish childhood, look with favor on its games, its pleasures, its

friendly instincts. Who of you has not at times longed for that age when laughter is always bursting forth and the soul is ever at peace? Why do you want to rob these young innocents of the pleasures of such brief and fleeting hours and of such precious gifts, which they are too young to misuse? Why wish to fill with bitterness and grief these early years that pass so quickly and will not return for them any more than for us? Fathers, do you know the moment that death awaits your child? Do not prepare for yourselves a life of sorrow by robbing them of the brief moment that nature gives them: as soon as they are able to sense the pleasure of existing, see to it that they enjoy themselves, see to it that at whatever hour God calls them, they do not die without having tasted of life....

Let us not forget our human condition and pursue idle fancies. Humanity has its place in the general order; childhood, too, in the span of human life; we must look upon man in manhood and the child in childhood. To assign to each one his place and establish him in it, to order the human passions in accordance with man's constitution, that is all we can do for his well being. The rest depends on extraneous circumstances that are beyond our power to control....

May I venture to state here that the greatest, most important, and most useful rule of all education is not to save time, but to lose it? Gentle reader, pardon my paradoxes: they follow necessarily upon reflection; and whatever you may say, I would rather be paradoxical than prejudiced. The most dangerous period of human life extends from birth to the age of twelve. That is the time when error and vice take root before there is any counteracting faculty; and when that faculty develops, the roots are so deep that it is too late to pull them up. If children jumped suddenly from the breast to the age of reason, the education that they now receive would suffice; but in the natural process of growth, they need an entirely different one. Their minds should be left uncultivated until all their faculties have developed; for until then it is impossible for them to see the light that you offer as a guide or to follow, in the immense realm of ideas, a path that reason traces ever so faintly even for the trained eye.

Early education should therefore be purely negative. It consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in protecting the heart from vice and the mind from error. If you could let your pupil alone and see that he is left alone; if you could bring him up sane and sound to the age of twelve, without his being able to tell his right hand from his left, then from his very first lessons, the eyes of his understanding would be open to reason; free from all prejudices and preconceptions, his mind would present no obstacle to the full effect of your teaching; and from a purely negative beginning, you would achieve an educational prodigy.

Proceed counter to customary practice and you will almost always be right. By trying to make a learned man out of a child, fathers and tutors begin all too soon tormenting, correcting, reprimanding, flattering, threatening, bribing, instructing, and reasoning. Rather than that, be reasonable and never reason with your pupil, especially when you want to make him change his dislikes; for by dragging reason into unpleasant matters you make it distasteful to him and discredit it early in a mind that is not ready to understand it....

You put your trust in the present order of society without thinking that this order is subject to inevitable revolutions and that you cannot possibly foresee or provide against the society with which your children may have to deal. The great become small, the rich become poor, the monarch a subject; are these strokes of fortune so rare that you can count on immunity? We are approaching a crisis and the age of revolutions. Who can guarantee what will become of you then? Everything men have made, men can destroy: nature's characters alone are ineffaceable; and nature forms no princes, no rich men, or men of high degree.

014

There can be no patriotism without liberty, no liberty without virtue, no virtue without citizens; create citizens, and you have everything you need; without them, you will have nothing but debased slaves, from the rulers of the State downwards. To form citizens is not the work of a day; and in order to have men it is necessary to educate them when they are children. It will be said, perhaps, that whoever has men to govern, ought not to seek, beyond their nature, a perfection of which they are incapable; that he ought not to desire to destroy their passions; and that the execution of such an attempt is no more desirable than it is possible. I will agree, further, that a man without passions would certainly be a bad citizen; but it must be agreed also that, if men are not taught not to love some things, it is impossible to teach them to love one object more than another—to prefer that which is truly beautiful to that which is deformed. If, for example, they were early accustomed to regard their individuality only in its relation to the body of the State, and to be aware, so to speak, of their own existence merely as a part of that of the State, they might at length come to identify themselves in some degree with this greater whole, to feel themselves members of their country, and to love it with that exquisite feeling which no isolated person has save for himself; to lift up their spirits perpetually to this great object, and thus to transform into a sublime virtue that dangerous disposition which gives rise to all our vices. Not only does philosophy demonstrate the possibility of giving feeling these new directions; history furnishes us with a thousand striking examples. If they are so rare among us moderns, it is because nobody troubles himself whether citizens exist or not, and still less does anybody think of attending to the matter soon enough to make them. It is too late to change our natural inclinations, when they have taken their course, and egoism is confirmed by habit: it is too late to lead us out of ourselves when once the human Ego, concentrated in our hearts, has acquired that contemptible activity which absorbs all virtue and constitutes the life and being of little minds. How can patriotism germinate in the midst of so many other passions which smother it? And what can remain, for fellow-citizens, of a heart already divided between avarice, a mistress, and vanity?

From the first moment of life, men ought to begin learning to deserve to live; and, as at the instant of birth we partake of the rights of citizenship, that instant ought to be the beginning of the exercise of our duty. If there are laws for

the age of maturity, there ought to be laws for infancy, teaching obedience to others: and as the reason of each man is not left to be the sole arbiter of his duties, government ought the less indiscriminately to abandon to the intelligence and prejudices of fathers the education of their children, as that education is of still greater importance to the State than to the fathers: for, according to the course of nature, the death of the father often deprives him of the final fruits of education; but his country sooner or later perceives its effects. Families dissolve, but the State remains.

Should the public authority, by taking the place of the father, and charging itself with that important function, acquire his rights by discharging his duties, he would have the less cause to complain, as he would only be changing his title, and would have in common, under the name of citizen, the same authority over his children, as he was exercising separately under the name of father, and would not be less obeyed when speaking in the name of the law, than when he spoke in that of nature. Public education, therefore, under regulations prescribed by the government, and under magistrates established by the Sovereign, is one of the fundamental rules of popular or legitimate government. If children are brought up in common in the bosom of equality; if they are imbued with the laws of the State and the precepts of the general will; if they are taught to respect these above all things; if they are surrounded by examples and objects which constantly remind them of the tender mother who nourishes them, of the love she bears them, of the inestimable benefits they receive from her, and of the return they owe her, we cannot doubt that they will learn to cherish one another mutually as brothers, to will nothing contrary to the will of society, to substitute the actions of men and citizens for the futile and vain babbling of sophists, and to become in time defenders and fathers of the country of which they will have been so long the children.

I shall say. nothing of the Magistrates destined to preside over such an education, which is certainly the most important business of the State. It is easy to see that if such marks of public confidence were conferred on slight grounds, if this sublime function were not, for those who have worthily discharged all other offices, the reward of labor, the pleasant and honorable repose of old age, and the crown of all honors, the whole enterprise would be useless and the education void of success. For wherever the lesson is not supported by authority, and the precept by example, all instruction is fruitless; and virtue itself loses its credit in the mouth of one who does not practice it. But let illustrious warriors, bent under the weight of their laurels, preach courage: let upright Magistrates, grown white in the purple and on the bench, teach justice. Such teachers as these would thus get themselves virtuous successors, and transmit from age to age, to generations to come, the experience and talents of rulers, the courage and virtue of citizens, and common emulation in all to live and die for their country.