

## Learning - The Charlotte Mason Way!

Tags: [Charlotte Mason](#) [special needs](#)

“What curriculum are you using?” This question is frequently asked of homeschoolers. The homeschooling parent of the special learner is no exception, but finding the right program for this student can be a challenge. I found this to be so with my son, Macklin, who has learning issues. However, I have found that a method of education has worked better for not only my son, but for our entire family. The method was created by a turn-of-the century educator named Charlotte Mason.

Charlotte Mason (January 1, 1842 - January 16, 1923) was a British educator who devoted her life to the teaching of children. When she was orphaned at the age of 16 she enrolled in a teacher’s college in order to train for a career which would allow her to support herself. During her many years of teaching she formulated her own ideology for education and began to write and lecture on these ideas. Charlotte’s ideas transcended the belief that only the well-to-do could enjoy a rich curriculum which included literature, art and music appreciation.

When she was nearly fifty years of age Miss Mason founded her own teacher’s college where she trained future governesses and others who were interested in working with children. At that time she also began a correspondence school program for families who wished to implement her methods at home. It is because of this that she is often referred to as one of the founders of the modern day homeschool movement. Her concepts are widely used by homeschoolers today and there are many print and online resources available to learn about her techniques. While wonderful for the gifted child, the Charlotte Mason method is also of great benefit to the special learner. Her techniques are simple, practical and easy to implement in the home school environment.

**A balance of structure and productive free time** - Charlotte Mason believed that pupils benefited from scheduled morning lessons but the afternoons and evenings should remain free for productive leisure pursuits. Charlotte felt that children should spend their “free time” out of doors, reading for pleasure, listening to music or dabbling in art or “handicrafts” (such as sewing, woodwork, etc.). Confining the lessons to the morning helps to prevent burnout for both the child and the parent. Since struggling learners often have to work harder with more concentration and intensity than other “typical” children, this method is a perfect fit. Knowing that lessons only go until lunchtime helps everyone persevere because they know it will not be for too long. A picture schedule or check off list may be helpful to keep everyone on task. After lessons, productive free time should be encouraged. I suggest families put together an activity schedule for their special needs children that includes pictures of fun activities or toys the child can choose from. Depending on the severity of the needs, the child may have to be taught how to select the item, get it, play with it and then clean up when finished. Learning how to use free time is an important life skill that all children need to learn.

**Short lessons** - This is one of the most appealing concepts of the method and goes hand in hand with the structured morning lessons. Miss Mason felt that children should be exposed to a wide variety of subjects but that lessons should be short (as short as 5 to 15 minutes in the elementary years) to prevent boredom. Switching frequently helps to revive the mind and bring a fresh perspective to the day. Some subjects, like math or reading instruction, may be broken up into several short mini-lessons sprinkled throughout the day. This is especially helpful for the child with difficulties where learning is oftentimes a laborious process. Keeping lessons short helps decrease frustration and minimizes stress for both parent and child while at the same time bolstering confidence as subjects are checked off the daily “to do” list.

**“Living books” for literature** - Quality lesson time is spent reading and savoring the best literature for all ages. Charlotte Mason believed that great literature was key to education and to the formation of character in children. Books should be of high quality and should be able to draw in the reader. History and science are subjects where living books should be used. Quality language builds skills in the special learner. Parents should read to the child with needs. Older learners who may still be having difficulty reading independently may follow along in the book while listening to an audio book of the story. These are wonderful to use at bedtime, mealtime and on car rides as well.

Do not be discouraged if you have a child with severe mental disabilities. The library is full of beautiful picture books with

simple text and lovely illustrations which appeal to all ages. It never ceases to amaze me how much can be learned from a simple children's picture book. I use picture books with my son all the time for history and science lessons and the art captures his attention long enough for us to be able to learn together.

**Narration in place of examinations and written reports** - There is nothing more disconcerting to the special learner and the family than tests and written assignments. So many children struggle in these areas, even when it is clear that understanding is present. Happily, Charlotte Mason advocated narration or "telling back". The teacher would read the lesson from a well chosen book on any given subject (history, science, geography, etc.) and then the student would be required to tell back what had just been read. This tests comprehension and memory. A child who is able to repeat back the lesson, in his or own words, has internalized the knowledge.

Narration has been shown to be of great benefit to the special learner. It increases memory, auditory processing skills builds vocabulary and enhances language development. I use narration daily with my son. Using a quality children's picture book I will show my son the pictures and ask him to tell me what is happening in the story. I have adapted Charlotte's ideas to work for our situation. My son continues to make gains in language and enjoys books very much. He is also learning at the same time. Begin small with narration. It may be necessary to read very small sections at first while building skills. Start with one paragraph or even just a few sentences. Again, use picture books or very short fables in the beginning.

Narration may also be used when training children to do chores or learn new skills. Have the child repeat back to you the steps you have just outlined. Non verbal children may be provided with pictures to assist with communication.

**Nature Study and Outdoor Life** - Miss Mason felt it was important for children, especially young children, to spend as much time out of doors as possible. This is where hands-on science could take place. Observations are being made and the children are learning about the world around them. Again, the special learner is free to drink in nature with all senses and enjoy fresh air and move about. Narrations may be given when the parent asks "What do you see?" Couple your nature observations with books from the library in order to extend the science lesson, as this will enhance the learning. Children who are able to keep their own nature notebook are encouraged to do so. A nature notebook with pictures or drawings by an adult for the child who is unable to work on their own can be a thrill for the special needs child. I am currently working on a "Zoo Book" for my son. I plan to use sight words he is learning along with pictures of animals he loves.

**Habit and Character Training** - It could be said that Miss Mason's philosophy is more about character than education. The focus is on shaping the character and will of the child in a positive direction. This is done by focusing on individuals we want our children to have as heroes and emulate. It is never too early to begin habit training with children and it is of great importance to cultivate positive character traits and habits with the special learner. Charlotte felt it was important to teach children to learn how to govern themselves. It was, in her opinion, the chief responsibility of the parent to instill positive habits in the child. Often, children with learning issues struggle with poor habits and sometimes behavior problems. It is suggested to pick one habit at a time on which to work. This prevents the parent from being overwhelmed. For children with special needs pictures or social stories may be very helpful. When Macklin was younger he was prone to screaming fits when he became upset and unable to verbalize. I worked very hard with him on this and included several picture cards in our training to help cue him to appropriate behavior.

**Academics** - As mentioned before, Charlotte Mason advocated short lessons, and subjects such as reading, math and grammar were of no exception. She proposed a reading method which combined sight words and phonics. Many special learners have great difficulty with learning how to read. Utilizing sight words in some instances enables the child to begin to read and boosts confidence. Macklin has learned many sight words and understands that the printed word has meaning. He is able to read several very simple books because he knows some sight words and has a strong memory. Learning some sight words has given us a start in reading.

It was suggested by Miss Mason that math be done with the use of manipulatives, which can make the entire process so much easier and more pleasant for everyone. Story problems were important in the CM schools. At this time, Macklin is still unable to write with a pencil due to low muscle tone in his hands. We do math problems orally with manipulatives, or I write the problem on the white board and he solves the problems with his counters. Rubber stamps are also a good item to use for children who have difficulty writing.

Grammar and composition are subjects that Charlotte felt were necessary. Again, short lessons were stressed. She suggested that grammar be studied through the literature that was being read. A student who could narrate well was already composing. This oral composition would eventually be transferred to written composition over a period of a year or two. The transition was to be taken slowly, and not until the child was older (11-12). Again, for the struggling learner, narrations may be taken down by the parent or tape recorded and later transcribed. This provides a record of the child's accomplishments, in spite of any reading or writing difficulties the child may have.

**Art and Music Appreciation** - These studies were reserved only for the students of the upper class in Miss Mason's day.

However, she felt that students of all classes benefitted from exposure to the Fine Arts. Children in the Charlotte Mason home schools would focus on an artist and composer for a period of time. This is something we can also implement at home. Libraries are full of recordings of classical music as well as oversized art books. Most areas have at least one classical music radio station. Children of all abilities benefit from exposure to such beauty.

Many special learners are able to memorize tedious bits of information such as math facts and geography concepts when the information is set to music. This is also an easy way to implement some learning in the home school. Many libraries carry such products, and many other similar resources may be found in homeschool catalogs. If music is a way to unlock learning for your special child then by all means investigate the resources.

This article is by no means exhaustive with respect to the concepts Charlotte Mason purported. I have barely scratched the surface here. But I wanted to share ideas on how to implement these methods with the special learner. When I first heard of the Charlotte Mason method I knew I wanted try it in my homeschool, but initially I felt it would be too advanced for my son who has autism. However, as I learned more, I realized that I could adapt her ideas to fit the needs of not only my son, but of my family as well. This method of education has truly become a way of life for us. I do hope that some of the ideas here may be of encouragement to you and your homeschool, no matter what the needs or different abilities of your children may be.

Resources to learn more:

### **Books**

A Charlotte Mason Education and More Charlotte Mason Education by Catherine Levison

The Charlotte Mason Companion by Karen Andreola

Charlotte Mason Study Guide by Penny Gardner

### **Online Resources**

Ambleside Online <http://www.amblesideonline.org/>

Ambleside Online is a FREE online curriculum that follows the ideas of Charlotte Mason. Through this site you can find many articles and resources, including Miss Mason's own written works.

Read about how others use Charlotte Mason ideas with their special needs children here:

<http://www.amblesideonline.org/SpecialNeeds.shtml>

### **Email Support Groups**

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AOwithLDKids/>

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/CMspecialkids/>

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