

## Authority & Masterly Inactivity

### 1. Authority is the Foundation

Charlotte Mason believed that **parents and teachers have a natural, God-given authority** — not to dominate, but to guide. It's not authoritarian, and it's not permissive either. Authority is **firm, just, and loving**.

She writes:

"Authority is just and faithful in all matters of behaviour and duty, and that which it claims is a child's obedience."  
(*Parents and Children*, Vol. 2)

#### **CASE STUDY:**

*One Sunday morning at the park, my neighbor Frédérique witnessed me [Pamela] trying to cope with my son Leo, who was then 2 years old. Leo did everything quickly, and when I went to the park with him, I was in constant motion, too. He seemed to regard the gates around play areas as merely an invitation to exit. Frédérique had recently adopted a beautiful 3-year-old from Russia. At the time of our outing, she had been a mother for all of three months. Yet just by virtue of being French, she already had a whole different vision of authority than I did — what was possible and not, not possible. Frédérique and I were sitting at the perimeter of the sandbox, trying to talk. But Leo kept dashing outside the gate surrounding the sandbox. Each time, I got up to chase him, scold him, and drag him back while he screamed. At first, Frédérique watched this little ritual in silence. Then, without any condescension, she said that if I was running after Leo all the time, we wouldn't be able to indulge in the small pleasure of sitting and chatting for a few minutes. "That's true," I said. "But what can I do?" Frédérique said I should be sterner with Leo. In my mind, spending the afternoon chasing Leo was inevitable. In her mind, it was not, not possible. I pointed out that I'd been scolding Leo for the last 20 minutes. Frédérique smiled. She said that I needed to make my "no" stronger and to really believe in it. The next time Leo tried to run outside the gate, I said "no" more sharply than usual. He left anyway. I followed and dragged him back. "You see?" I said. "It's not possible." Frédérique smiled again and told me not to shout but rather to speak with more conviction. I was scared that I would terrify him. "Don't worry," Frédérique said, urging me on. Leo didn't listen the next time either. But I gradually felt my "no's" coming from a more convincing place. They weren't louder, but they were more self-assured. By the fourth try, when I was finally brimming with conviction, Leo approached the gate but—miraculously— didn't open it. He looked back and eyed me warily. I widened my eyes and tried to look disapproving. After about 10 minutes, Leo stopped trying to leave altogether. He seemed to forget about the gate and just played in the sandbox with the other kids. Soon Frédérique and I were chatting, with our legs stretched out in front of us. I was shocked that Leo suddenly viewed me as an authority figure. "See that," Frédérique said, not gloating. "It was your tone of voice." She pointed out that Leo didn't appear to be traumatized. For the moment — and possibly for the first time ever — he actually seemed like a French child.*

#### **Discuss:**

- **Contrast the parenting styles of Pamela and of Frédérique.**
- **What was Pamela ignorant of and what was required of her?**
- **To which parent would you relate the most?**
- **Why do you think this?**

## 2. Masterly Inactivity Flows From Rightful Authority

Masterly inactivity is **how proper authority behaves** — with calmness, confidence, and self-restraint.

- Because the parent is **secure in their role**, they don't need to micromanage.
- Because they have true authority, they can **wait wisely** and let the child act, struggle, and grow.

In Mason's words, the "masterly" part means the adult is **in full command of themselves**, not reacting emotionally or anxiously. That's what gives them the freedom to "do nothing" — when doing nothing is the wisest thing to do.

### Discuss:

- *In what ways does secure authority make it possible to step back and allow children to act for themselves?*
  - *How can we exercise authority in ways that help children practice self-government rather than mere compliance?*
  - *How can consistent boundaries help create the safety needed for masterly inactivity to work?*
  - *Have you ever found yourself stepping in too much because you didn't feel secure in your authority? What was the result?*
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## 3. The Goal: Self-Government in the Child

Mason's model of authority aims to grow children who **govern themselves** under the moral and spiritual principles they've absorbed.

"The object of education is to teach children the right use of authority and freedom." (*Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 6)

- **Authority** provides moral structure, guidance, and boundaries.
- **Masterly inactivity** creates the space for the child to internalize that structure and start **exercising their own will rightly**.

**Authority provides the framework;**  
**masterly inactivity gives room to grow within it.**

It's a posture of **respectful leadership** — not dominating, not withdrawing — but guiding with consistency, strength and calm confidence.