

Planning a CM Day

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[Living Books Curriculum](#)

“Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.”

—William Butler Yeats

Imagine that it’s Monday morning, your older children have gotten out of bed, dressed and eaten breakfast all without your help. While you get the baby dressed and fed, your older children check their “chores list” to see what they are responsible for today. After finishing their chores, they sit down at the kitchen table and begin school. Because they know that all real learning begins with discipleship, they study the Bible with you. Following that, each knows they must check their schedule of readings and written work to be sure of the learning for the day. Your children look forward to this because each book they read is full of interesting and memorable events of history, science, nature or people.

As they complete a section of work they come to you for oral narration. Science, by *your* choice, is a family learning time and so the books are read aloud together and the whole family narrates. History is also a family affair, in fact, the book you are currently reading is so interesting the children are talking about how they can “hardly wait” till after lunch for family read aloud.

Does this scenario sound possible to you? It is. Charlotte Mason understood how children really learn and laid out a set of principles to make it possible to inspire children to learn by their own self-effort. To bring this wonder about, the teaching parent must first understand his or her role. “The children, not the teacher, are the responsible persons; they do the work by self-effort.”ⁱ

[Charlotte Mason](#) taught that when books are many, varied, and *living* the child is able to take up the ideas in them like a plant taking nutrients from the soil. The result is “full happy living, resourcefulness, expansiveness, expression, power of initiative, serviceableness—in a word, character.” Charlotte Mason believed children learn best when given abundant, high-quality books; time in the outdoors; and are taught gently using methods such as narration, short lessons, and “masterly inactivity.” Living Books Curriculum is based on the work of this educational reformer. As Miss Mason recommended, our curriculum is designed around a collection of **living books**, which nurture thinking and communicate knowledge mind-to-mind. Children require books that are *living* in order for their minds and hearts to develop to their fullest capacity.

The Basics of CM

What is the “bottom line” for a Charlotte Mason curriculum in my homeschool? The answer is, 1) Understand the principles of CM, 2) Consistently apply the principles, 3) Plan your school day to support those principles. It really is that simple. To learn the principles of a Charlotte Mason education visit our website for the [Seven Keys to Learning](#) and for Charlotte Mason’s [20 Principles](#).

The foundational principle for a Charlotte Mason education is that a child is a person. Children are born complete and full of endless possibilities. Children are *not* incomplete adults; they *become* adults. They do not lack maturity but rather guidance, nurture, and opportunity. Your role as their teacher is to provide those things. When you grasp this single truth it will change your understanding of your homeschool and your children.

The Magic of Short Lessons

Recently a mother asked for guidance in preventing "dawdling". Another asked for help with her daughter who was unable to focus on one thing. Charlotte Mason wrote of the importance of securing a child's full attention in order for them to learn and to establish the habit of finishing things.

We have all seen children as inattentive as magpies. We have also seen their distaste for certain subjects expressed in restless behavior. How does the teaching parent harness the desire for knowledge together with a capacity for attention?

The answer lies in the length of the lessons themselves. When the lessons are short and varied, your child's interest is always fresh and ready for what comes next. Charlotte Mason recommended lessons be no more than ten minutes in length for a child under the age of eight (*Home Education*, p. 142).

After the age of eight, the lesson can be lengthened to twenty minutes. For children ten years of age and up, thirty to forty-five minutes is sufficient. Care should be taken that if a child appears idle or not accomplishing the work with full attention, the work should be changed to something as unlike it as possible.

Using short lessons is more than mere technique; Charlotte Mason calls this approach a "root principle". By using short lessons the child is permitted to bring the full power of his attention to bear on a subject. Doing by his own will what is usually coerced or persuaded, brings inner strength to the child. "To make yourself attend, to make yourself know, this indeed is to come into a kingdom, all the more satisfying to children because they are so made that they revel in knowledge." (Charlotte Mason, *A Philosophy of Education*, p. 77)

If your child is "taking more time than necessary", try these methods in your planning:

Use 20-minute lessons. If a 20-minute lesson is too long, shorten it. Set a timer for your child, so he has a clear sense of how long the lesson is to be.

Use material that is appropriate. Requiring a short narration will demonstrate whether you need to adapt the material or find other material for the work you want to accomplish. A child cannot narrate what she does not know or understand.

Alternate disciplinary subjects with inspirational subjects. Charlotte Mason recommended a disciplinary subject be followed by an inspirational one. Dr. Jack Beckman, Professor of Education at Covenant College in South Carolina and a Charlotte Mason scholar reminds us that, "Inspirational subjects touch heart and mind and are reflective of things such as art, music, literature, history, etc. Disciplinary subjects are those in which teacher-student interactions are necessary as students are unable to

apprehend their concepts, content, and/or skills alone – mathematics, languages, handwriting, certain aspects of science, etc.”

Establish the habit of finishing work in a timely way. Charlotte Mason said, “Habit is ten natures”. In other words, once the habit forms it is as if it were the child’s very nature to be that way. To read more on habit formation see *Home Education*, p.96-134. Full text can be found online at <http://www.amblesideonline.org/CM/toc.html#1>

Each new lesson should recall the last. When starting a new lesson ask your child to recall the lesson that came the day before. Recollection of the previous lesson gives a context for the new knowledge.

Planning for Learning™

In 2005, Jim and Sheila Carroll travelled to Ambleside, England to the Armit Library, which houses Ms. Mason’s books and papers, to learn first-hand how she organized her syllabus., in other words, how did she put all the great books, narration, nature study, picture study and composer study, together? We looked at a broad spectrum of grades and learned that each term of the typical English three-term system had “end-of-term-narration questions” written by Miss Mason. There was a natural break in learning.

Living Books Curriculum uses a 36-week schedule divided into four terms. Each term is eight weeks of instruction, with the ninth being what we call a “flex” week. The flex week permits the student to complete unfinished work; it gives the teaching parent time to assess learning through end-of-term narration questions, and also allows time for field trips. You can begin and end each term as best fits your schedule. For example, you may take a short break after the completion of a term, or conversely you may want to push ahead to have a longer break later in the year.

Organizing by Day and Week

Though a CM curriculum may at first appear to be relaxed in form, it is in fact highly structured. But, it is structured along the lines of a child’s nature. The guiding principles are those inherent in every human being. To accomplish the task of teaching you must be clear where to begin and where you hope to end. The best way to do that is to understand the CM principles, have a regular plan and adhere to it, yet save some room for flexibility. For example, there are days when the weather is perfect for some outdoor activity. Take the opportunity to go on a nature walk instead of the planned readings.

Remember that most everything takes longer than you think it will. If you plan well and adhere to the principle of short lessons you will find teaching a pleasure. Flexibility is key, You and your child do not need to rigidly adhere . there are times when you may forge ahead and times when you may feel behind do not worry, you long term goal is to finish the year. Keep that in mind if you have a few days that do not go as smoothly as you wish.

Below are some examples of schedules from the [Living Books Curriculum Teaching Guides](#). There are other examples of schedules found in *A Charlotte Mason Education* (Sourcebooks, Inc, 2000), *More Charlotte Mason Education* (Sourcebooks, Inc, 2001) both by Catherine Levison and *When Children Love to Learn* (Crossway, 2004) produced by Child Light Foundation

Sample Weekly Schedule

The following is a suggestion of how you might organize your week. Please note that, except for Bible Study and Math, not every subject is taught every day. If you are new to organizing your time in this way, start with our suggested schedule and then adjust it as you learn what works for you.

Subject	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Bible Study	X	X	X	X	X
Math	X	X	X	X	X
Science	X	X	X	X	X
Language Arts					
Storytelling	X	X	X	X	
Dictation/ Spelling	X				X X
Recitation	X		X		
Grammar	X	X	X	X	
Copywork					
World History	X		X		
American History		X		X	
Nature Study					X
Picture Study	Introduce				Narrate
Composer Study			X		
Geography	X			X	

Who we are

Jim Carroll is a professor of Educational Psychology for Walden University. Sheila Carroll has master's degrees in Children's Literature and in Educational Leadership. She and her husband are founders of Living Books Curriculum, which produces a homeschool curriculum inspired by the work of Charlotte Mason. The proceeds of Living Books Curriculum provide their CM-based educational materials to families and schools in developing nations, through their non-profit organization, [Worldwide Educational Resources](http://worldwideeducationalresources.com/).