

## Raising Children in the Early 17th Century: Education

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Along with practical skills, it was also important that Plymouth children learn to read, as Separatists emphasized personal study of the Bible. However, there was no grammar school in Plymouth Colony for many years. According to William Bradford, in the first years parents taught their children themselves, the colonists having neither a suitable teacher available nor the money to support one. By 1633, that apparently changed, as least for young children. Samuel Fuller's will written in 1633 contained the line, "It is my will that when my daughter Mercy is fitt to goe to scole that mrs Heeks may teach her as well as my sonne." Margaret Hicks may have run an informal school in which she would have taught at least the basics of reading. She might have taught writing and "casting accounts" as well. Children could start school at a very young age; Samuel Fuller's son referred to above was four or five in 1633. NOTE: While a law was passed in 1658 that each town in the colony should have a schoolmaster, Plymouth did not have a free school until 1672. In that year a recent Harvard graduate with the unusual name of Ammi Ruhamah Corlet kept the school "now begun and erected." Barring the references above, there are no details about schooling in early Plymouth, so the following text refers to common practices in England.

Many schools in England were begun as charities, and affiliated with the church. Their chief purpose was to create good Christians, who would also be loyal and dutiful subjects. The teaching materials therefore included catechisms and other religious works. Students were also brought to church services by their teachers, where they took notes on the sermons to discuss in class. Small free schools in villages, supported by bequests, were often taught by the local curate and held in

the church. While the instruction itself was free in this type of school, entrance fees, purchases of books, ink paper, etc. and other charges put schools out of reach for the poor. The "petty" schools taught basic literacy, and were sometimes taught by women. Children in these schools were generally five to seven years old. A second type taught practical math and accounting as well, readying boys for apprenticeships to crafts where such skills would be needed. Students usually left these schools by fourteen, and would soon after begin apprenticeships. The grammar schools taught classical languages as well as grammar and prepared students to go on to a university.

Unlike today, with reading and writing taught simultaneously, in the 17th century the two were separate skills and often taught by different teachers. Reading printed sources was taught first. The child could stop at that point or go on to learn to write. A child who could write also could read handwriting. Mathematics was another specialized topic, used primarily for practical purposes such as accounting, land surveying and navigation. Some schools also taught needlework to the girls.



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## Reading

The first step in learning to read was learning the alphabet. Letter recognition could be taught in several ways. They could be learned by use of a hornbook, a wooden paddle on which was a printed sheet protected by a thin sheet of horn. It generally had the alphabet in one or two typefaces, often a section with vowels and consonants in combination, and the Lord's Prayer, but there were many variations over the centuries. One writer recommended the use of four large wooden or bone dice, with the letters carved individually on each face. These twenty-four surfaces would be enough for the whole alphabet as at the time "I" and "J" were considered two versions of the same letter, as were "U" and "V." By throwing the dice and being told which letters were on top, the child "would soon gain his alphabet by the way of sport or pastime." Somewhat later, "hornbooks" made of gingerbread were sold, with the child allowed to eat each letter correctly named.

Once the letters were learnt, children were drilled by repeating the alphabet both forwards and backwards. Next, they were told to identify each use of a particular letter on a page. After that, came letters in combination, first all syllables of two letters, then three, and so on. The first sentences to be read were of words of one syllable, such as [spelling modernized]:

If we do ill, fie on us all.

Ah is it so: is he my foe?

Woe be to me, if I do so.

Students progressed to multi-syllable words, first two, then three, etc.; learning to parse the syllables and follow the rules of grammar. Their readings generally had some moral lesson as well, as in this lesson for words ending in three or four consonants:

As I went through the castl yard, I did chaunce to stumbl in a queach of brambls, so as I did scratch my heels and feet, and my gay girdl of gold and purpl: then I sought how I might wrastl out, but I dasht my hands into a bundl of thistls, till at length by the strength of mine arms and legs, I wrought myself out, but did catch a cough, and caught a wrinch in myn ankl, and a scratch on my mouth: but now am I taught whilst I am in this world, how to wrangl with such as are too strong and full of might for me.

## Writing

Many students stopped schoolwork once they had learned to read. Others went on to learn writing. This was a more complicated process than today, as students also had to learn to make their pens and ink, and prepare the paper before writing. There were a number of "hands" or styles of letters, but secretary and italic were the two most commonly taught. Italic was considered to be the quicker to write and to learn. Some writers used a combination of the two, writing names, foreign words, etc. in italic, and the body of the text in secretary.



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