

For
PARENTS

Your child in the Organic School

In enrolling your child in the School of Organic Education, you are offering him or her a unique experience that will last a lifetime. Begun as a demonstration of a new approach to education, the school has operated for almost a century, and its students have gone forth into the larger world equipped with important skills that include academic knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and an ability to define goals and achieve successful lives on their own terms.

The school is committed to helping students develop strength of body, mind, and spirit. Because these goals may be achieved in untraditional ways, we have prepared this booklet to provide you with specific information about what to expect from the Organic School. We will try to anticipate questions you might have, and suggest ways you can work with us in creating the best possible conditions for your child to benefit from the precepts of Organic Education.

Having a child at Organic is a responsibility in itself, and we hope you will be interested in participating in the life here. Parents' Roundtable meets once a month, and this organization is a vital component of our operation. Part of any child's education is an awareness that his parents are supportive of his school.

Where did the "Organic" theory come from?

The Organic School was founded in 1907 by Marietta Johnson, an educator who was disillusioned with the traditional system and developed a theory of child-centered education based upon her reading of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and early pioneers in field of child development C. Hanford Henderson, Nathan Oppenheim, and John Dewey. A gifted speaker, Mrs. Johnson often spoke of the child as an *organism* to be educated, saying that it was the duty of the school to consider the whole organism rather than just providing formal academic work for him to memorize. She wrote, "Organic Education means the education of the entire organism. It means providing proper exercise for the development of the whole being." Many progressive educators lectured and wrote of these ideas, but Mrs. Johnson took the audacious step of creating a school to demonstrate the theory, and she devoted her life to keeping the school functioning.

It is to Mrs. Johnson's credit that her school lives today as the School of Organic Education. In the years following her death in 1938, the

teachers and parents of students in her school banded together to continue her work by keeping the school going. It seemed inconceivable to them that Fairhope could exist without the Organic School, and, indeed, in all the years since 1938, there has never been a time that the school closed. This is tribute indeed to Marietta Johnson, since the devotion to her school comes from those who attended it or had children who did, or from dedicated teachers who put the value of teaching in the Organic way above their own financial needs. We hope that you will become one of the "Organic family" that sees the wisdom in her simple theory and supports it—perhaps even beyond the days when your children have grown.

What's different about this school?

You will notice some differences in the Organic school and other schools right away. Classes are called "Life Groups" rather than grades, and these groups include what in other schools would be two grades. First Life would be first and second grades in a traditional school; Second Life, third and fourth grades; Third Life, fifth and sixth grades, and Fourth Life, seventh and eighth grades. (It may be interesting to learn that in Mrs. Johnson's lifetime, the seventh/eighth grade group, wanting to be "different," asked to have their group called "Junior High;" and, many years later, after the term Junior High had come into common usage in the public school system, Organic students requested that their seventh/eighth group be called Fourth Life, and so it is.) These groups are deliberately kept small in order to provide the individual attention each child deserves.

It is sometimes difficult for parents to accept the lack of grades and tests at our school. However, this lack of tests and letter grades is crucial to the philosophy behind Organic education. Mrs. Johnson maintained that, while all children can be coached to memorize material that will be asked on a test, *this is not what learning is about*. Learning happens when one is interested in a subject and *wants* to learn it. It is the job of the school to expose children to information on a wide range of academic subjects, and present these subjects in a way based upon the needs of childhood at each particular phase of growth. For instance, it would be pointless to equip the kindergarten and first life groups with high school science books, but children at this age are fascinated by animals, insects, flowers, the earth and sky. The Organic approach is to take him outdoors where he can observe

nature first-hand and ask the questions that occur to him. It is the job of the teacher to structure lessons to coincide both with the development of the particular child and the academic requirements of the classroom. Ultimately, the child is prepared – even eager – for the formal work of the study of biology and physical science when he reaches the appropriate intellectual level.

This is not an easy balance to measure. If Organic Education is “working,” you will find your child talking with enthusiasm about caterpillars, turtles, Eskimos, Shakespeare, Mexico, Greek mythology, Abraham Lincoln, cloud formations, folk dancing – all manner of things that might surprise you. You will probably find your child exhibiting a level of joy about his school that you would not necessarily expect. It is the job of the school to pull disparate elements together for its students so that by the end of their time there, they not only have knowledge of a wide number of things, they have the wherewithal to explore and are stimulated to pursue further knowledge on their own.

Over the years, the misunderstanding grew up that this school was designed to allow children to do as they pleased. It was never the case. The child at Organic was encouraged to work on his own in order to develop a sense of self-discipline, and this was always closely regulated by his teacher. Punctuality, obedience, basic good behavior and respect for authority was insisted upon, while at the same time the school always made every effort to require only those things that contribute to the development of self-discipline. To encourage this positive growth, the child has always been provided opportunities to meet situations in which he was keenly interested. To a casual onlooker, this may appear to be allowing him to do as he pleased.

While not advocating tests and exams in the traditional sense, the Organic School teacher may use them occasionally to see how well the class is grasping the various disciplines to which it is exposed. This is not to create an unnatural competition between students, or to provide parents with a yardstick to compare their children to others, but to inform the faculty of how well it is doing the job of educating.

It is sometimes uncomfortable to parents not to have a measurement, particularly when they are accustomed to the constant testing and grading of the public school system. We have found that too often under such a system, the test becomes an end in itself (often, unfortunately,

the *only* end), and the educational system loses track of its responsibility to students. Whenever the school can report to you that your child is growing and that he is living a natural life with his fellows without fear and without the threat of failure, you and he are ahead of the game. When you find that your child is learning to stand on his own feet and speak his thoughts without the need for special awards, you can know he is succeeding in the best possible meaning of that word.

How can you help your child at the Organic School?

The Organic School was created in a very different environment from the world we live in today. At the turn of the last century, idealists like Marietta Johnson believed that the future held the possibility of greatness for mankind. Mrs. Johnson herself felt that her school would contribute to this greatness. While supporting her premise, we at the Organic School are aware that the 21st Century offers challenges and problems that could not have been anticipated a hundred years ago.

Television on the level that it now pervades society was not dreamed of when the school was started. Of course computers had not come into existence. Mrs. Johnson felt that families should enjoy their free time together, participating in creative projects, outdoor recreation, supportive and educational pursuits such as reading to each other, enjoying music, discussing ideas. She advocated early bedtimes and urged mothers to offer their families nutritious, uncomplicated food. This is so far from the way we live our lives today that it is difficult to take it seriously. Yet, we at the school believe that it is the responsibility of adults today to examine ways to incorporate some of this attitude in our expectations of our children and our own home lives.

Your children should give you great satisfaction in just being themselves, and ultimately the success of our school depends upon very close and equal responsibility and cooperation between the parents and the school. After all, the school only has the child seven hours every day; the parents have him for 17. Parental agreement on the best use of out-of-school time is of great importance.

It is agreed by educators today that too much television, particularly for young children, can be destructive to their capacity to learn, to say nothing of its impact on their physical well being. This is also the

case of constant use of computers – particularly for video games and unlimited Internet access. Children need and love exercise in the fresh air – climbing, running, dancing, and playing informal games and sports. The need for physical exercise in children cannot be over-emphasized, and there is no question that television and computer games “as baby-sitter” are of the contributing factors in its loss.

We cannot overstate the case for the child’s needs for proper nourishment and sufficient sleep. A simple awareness of nutrition, for you and your family, can make your life more pleasant and productive. Your resolve in creating a harmonious home must include a dedication to your own peace of mind and health. To renew your own spirit, you must find ways of providing for the physical and psychological health of yourself as well as your family.

Take time to relax with a book for yourself, or to read to your children in the evening. Observe and cherish your children as they relate to their world and learn. It sounds basic, obvious; however, this simple human activity will not be available to you all your life, and you will one day want to remember it.

Take a walk with the whole family at sunset. The Fairhope pier has always been a center of life in this town, and even now it offers an atmosphere of wholesome pleasure for families and people of all ages. There are lovely tree-lined streets where you can stroll and be part of your community. If you bicycle, run, or jog for your health – beneficial as these activities are, they do not supplant an old fashioned walk in which you take deep breaths of fresh air, inhale the fragrances of flowers, grass, and plants, and take note of the changes of season. This type of constitutional can be enjoyed as a family or alone, and at its end you will feel invigorated and stimulated to experience a pleasant evening. This should not be a rare occasion or a luxury, it is a vital part of existence and you owe it to yourself as often as possible.

New, relaxing family activities may mean a radical change in routine from the hours of television – much of which is inappropriate or overstimulating for children and unsatisfying for adults anyway. We recommend that television time be limited, and that a child’s viewing be carefully monitored, often shared, by his parents.

An evening with no television is best of all. Seek other ways to be amused and to amuse your children. This change will be enormously

beneficial in the long run. A quiet evening of reading, for example, is conducive to a pleasant sleep, and even today, medical science corroborates the need for eight hours of sleep a night for adults and ten for children. This amount of sleep may sound like a lot, and you may not be able to achieve it right away, but you will be rewarded if you make the effort to try until you at least find the level in which you and your family function best.

Most “Organic” – At Their Own Pace

It is not part of the Organic School program to accelerate the growth and educative process; neither should it be yours. Understand that your child is growing and learning at a pace acceptable and appropriate to him. There is nothing wrong with answering his questions or working with him on projects where he shows interest – in fact this can be one of the most positive experiences you can share. However, often parents err too much on the other side, with all good intentions, wanting to participate in their child’s education. Such families may push too hard, and mistakenly direct a child in what seems to them to be areas of achievement, and, to please the parents a child often works to excel in tasks beyond his level or outside his innate interests. This can cause self-consciousness, undue pressure, and a feeling of insecurity based on a fear of failure to impress adults. It creates children adept at “showing off,” and often appearing older than their years, but this kind of a child has been cheated of his childhood, and of his true self. At the Organic School we agree with Rousseau who said, “The prolongation of childhood is the hope of the race.”

Hope is a word we would like to hear more often. Because we at the Organic School have hope for all children, we are committed to the principles Mrs. Johnson set down long ago. Because we have so often seen these principles work, we support the school in the long term.

We want you to share the education of your children with us, and join us in this spirit of hope.

And, For the Future

We expect the school to grow stronger in the 21st Century. For this to happen, the community, the parents, the faculty and the administration of the school must look forward. We must continue to incorporate the latest

scientific information on the development of the human organism. Marietta Johnson was informed with all the latest data on child development in her day. We now have scientific studies that affirm her work, and the school itself has operated as a demonstration of her principles since its inception. It is up to us to see that the school maintains its position as a leader in the field of progressive education and continues to serve children as it always has.

We welcome you to the school family and ask that you participate in the program of Organic Education both by lending your talents to the school and by using your time with your child to provide the best conditions for development of a balanced, integrated growth of body, mind, and spirit. A working fellowship of parent-school-child assures the attainment of this supremely worthwhile objective.

Board of Managers,
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A BETTER EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM WAS RIGHT HERE ALL THE TIME

By Mary Lois Timbes Adshead

In the scramble to redefine the needs of education in this country, those of us in South Alabama have a unique perspective: A radically different system has been here all the time. It is known as Organic Education, and it began in Fairhope in 1907.

In the early years of this century, visionary educator Marietta Johnson moved to this Utopian community to establish a school that would break the stranglehold of grades, tests, artificial measurements and the glorification of competition once and for all. From her study at the beginning of child development research and her own experience as a grade

school teacher and instructor of teachers, she had come to see that simply teaching to the test was too easy to do, and was also ineffective in establishing a love of learning that would last a lifetime. She felt passionately that children could be taught how to learn, and that that was the only way they would learn – by teaching themselves.

Today we all but worship test scores. We reward children for memorizing the answers that will assure passing grades. We constantly pit them against each other – we have them elect “prettiest girl,” “best citizen,” “most popular,” and, heaven forbid, “most likely to succeed.” Our measurements are just that. They are *ours*. We are asking our children to be little adults; we praise them for forgoing their childhood. We buy flash cards designed to teach them to read too early (while still in the crib). We have replaced sandlot games with an adult-supervised structure and intensity akin to that of professional sports. We dress our little girls in grownup attire and makeup, and subject them to beauty contests.

Education does not have to be that way, even in the overcrowded, understaffed schools in our urban centers. What is needed is a change of attitude toward childhood and children, from the parental level right through the school system. What is needed most of all is common sense about the nature of children.

Marietta Johnson was way ahead of her time. It is difficult to realize now that she was world famous until her death in 1938, and that her work goes on. We are still grappling with the possibilities of progressive education, although the public school system has tried for years to take bits of it, try them out, measure them, and ultimately not know what to do with them. Increased interest in the arts, open classrooms, other programs which appear to be part of her thinking have entered the mainstream. With new information about the development of the nervous system and the brain, we can see how much of what Mrs. Johnson embraced in her school was correct.

It will still take courage and commitment to real change to enable adults to respect childhood again. It will take the ability to allow our children to play. It will take parents having the initiative to turn off the television set. It will take a general willingness to observe and empathize with our own children and those we teach. These things, however, are basic. They are organic. They are simple without being easy. They are obvious – yet for at least one generation they have been ignored. It is time to

reexamine the precepts of progressive education and relate them to today's world.

The answer is not in test scores or in stricter punishment, particularly not in the increase in physical punishment advocated by some. Every child need not be home schooled, the solution often chosen by parents seeking an alternative to the situation in the public school system today.

Education is, as stated by Marietta Johnson almost a hundred years ago, *growth*. It should be designed for the whole organism, not simply the left side of the brain. Mrs. Johnson's dream for every child was for the education of a sound, accomplished body, a sympathetic, intelligent mind, and a sweet, sincere spirit. Every child is worth the effort, even those who have already been damaged by a system that celebrates authority.

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