

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, September 4, 1883, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. L Gilsey House, N. Y., Tuesday, Sept. 4th, 1883. My darling little wife:

Those dolls' heads have been haunting me ever since I saw you last and I still think that it would be very bad policy on our part to replace them.

If a child's face were to be smashed in and the head severed from the body — the child would die — and no amount of money could possibly replace it!

But should not a doll be to a child what the child is to us? If so — these dolls should die and be no longer used. I think it poor policy to allow the children to comfort themselves over a broken doll with the idea that “ papa will buy them a new doll — so they need not mind so very much!” I fear too that the callousness we display towards their dolls by permitting them to be lugged round in a mutilated condition without remark — must react prejudicially upon the children.

To us these dolls may appear to be only painted bits of wood or saw-dust bags with porcelain heads — but we should not forget that to Daisy and Elsie they are living things — their own helpless babies!

However they may deal with them Nature certainly has implanted in their hearts the instinctive desire to treat their dollies as real babies are treated by their mothers.

Should we not help them in this? Should we not try to see — ourselves — the child in the doll — and the mother in the child — and attempt to teach them through their play real lessons regarding the duties of a mother to a child. Lessons that perhaps might cause them in 2 after years to look back upon to-day and bless us for our thoughtfulness. I

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cannot but think that the girl's instinct to play with a doll points out Nature's method of preparing her for the life of the mother. Indeed the more I reflect upon the instinctive desires of children the more I see a purpose behind everything. Whether it is simply a process of blind evolution — or whether it is the result of a Mind behind Matter — the instinctive plays of children have an evident purpose in relation to adult life.

“Play” is Nature's method of educating a child. If you choose to substitute for “Nature” — “an intelligent mind” — then it is God's method of education! Surely Man is wrong to ignore or look down upon “play” as a means of instruction. Should we not rather study the plays of children — and seek to discover their meaning — so as to aid Nature in the development of her plan.

I have been trying to look at a doll through the eyes of a child — and have evolved some thoughts that are new to me — and that lead me to think that a great distinction should be made between our estimate of a doll and our estimate of any other toy. I would like to know what you think of my ideas so here goes for a few THOUGHTS UPON DOLLS!!

Now put your childish spectacles upon your nose and look at your doll. Forget the bag of saw-dust and the coarse wooden legs — and what do you see? High presto! Harlequin — pantaloons and clown what a change!

It has become a child.

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Now for a few deductions from this miracle.

Is it natural and according to motherly instincts that a child should be bought and sold? No.

Then I would say that whatever toys we buy for our children we should not let them think that we will buy dolls for them! Let the dolls be given to them as children are supposed to be given to us. Let the dolls come with a delightful air of mystery about them. Where did

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they come from? “God sent them” — or “the angels brought them” — or — let Santa Claus bring them. We don't give them dolls — we don't buy dolls. They come — or are sent. And why? That they may be taken care of and loved — and treated as real babies are by their mothers. As children do not know exactly how a baby should be taken care of by its mother — we should teach them. This means that they should not be allowed to have their doll excepting under supervision. Until they have learned habits of carefulness and gentleness — they should not be allowed to have their dolls excepting when we are with them — and we should be careful that they should then treat their dolls as living babies. We can teach them how important it is that the dolls should have regular habits — that they should be fed at regular hours — sleep at other hours — be washed at proper times and with proper precautions against catching cold. That they should be clothed according to the weather — that their little legs and arms should not be exposed — that the body should be kept warm by a flannel cloth tied round the waist. These and a hundred other important points that you know and I do not — could be inculcated by play.

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Whatever toys may be intrusted to their care I feel sure that dolls should be sacred things — not to be left to them alone — till they have learned their lesson of love and gentleness by heart.

Then the dolls should be named — so that each doll may have an individuality of its own. The dolls need not be substantial wooden or porcelain things. Substantial dolls are given that they may stand banging about without injury! But should a doll be banged about? Rough usage to a child should be promptly checked — and we should always keep the child in sight. Rather — I would say — we should choose fregile — beautiful dolls — as delicate as a real baby — so that they may learn to handle them with gentleness — and treat them with care.

We should treat injuries to the doll as we would treat injuries to a baby. Light injuries can be carefully repaired. Serious injuries should not be passed over lightly.

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A doll without legs or arms should not be treated as a perfect child. Better that it should become defunct — disappear — and be mourned over as a dead child. It should not be replaced until a sufficient length of time has elapsed for the child to feel its loss — and realize that its loss is due to carelessness, etc., etc., etc. A broken head should certainly not be replaced by another. If a child should lose its head can we replace it by another? Certainly not. Then to do so with a doll is to lower the child's ideal — destroy a delightful delusion — and bring the child down to the prosaic reality of the thing.

In the present case I would tell Daisy and Elsie that we cannot buy new heads for their dolls and ask them whether they think papa could buy new heads for them! Ask them whether they think they could eat or speak without heads! Could they play without heads? No — they could not even live without heads. Then I would tell them that their dolls cannot eat or speak or play without heads — that they cannot live without heads and that they must surely die. Tell them to say good-bye to their poor headless dolls — for they are going away from them — and they will never see them any more. While the children are asleep the dolls can be quietly removed and destroyed. The empty clothes might be left behind as a memento — but I think that the dolls should be utterly destroyed — burned up — or buried where they won't be found — or at least disposed of in such a way that there should be no possibility of your statement that they would never see them again — turning out false. Of course the loss must be accounted for in some way and your ingenuity would doubtless prove equal to the task. Perhaps the angels have taken them away — or better still — Santa Claus (who gave them) has taken them back as they were not cared for properly.

A valuable moral lesson will be gained if our children should grieve over the loss of these dolls — even as we would grieve over their loss. If our child should die from gross carelessness would not our grief be more bitter because we should blame ourselves for negligence — even though the accident were caused by a stranger. No other child could possibly replace the lost one. We may take another little one to our arms but it can never

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take the place of the other — It can never obliterate our remembrance of the first however much it may engage 6 our affections. The two are treasured in our hearts side by side not one in place of the other.

A new doll should not then be given too soon after the loss of the old. The name of the lost doll should be treasured — it should have an individuality of its own — and the child should be without a doll for a sufficient length of time to enable it to feel its loss — so that the recollection of it should not be obliterated by any subsequent doll.

And what should be our conduct towards the children if they grieve for the lose of their broken dolls.

We should sympathize with them in their loss — as we would ourselves wish to be sympathized with under similar real circumstances. We can talk to them in such a way as to lead them to feel that their dolls would have been alive now — had they been treated gently and kindly— as kindly and gently as Mama treats her babies — and that whatever the cause of the accident that killed the dolls — and whoever killed them — it was their duty to take care of them. Santa Claus was grieved and had taken them away. The lesson to be a real lesson should be self -taught. The matter should be kindly and sympathetically set before them in such a way as to lead them to blame themselves — that the feeling may be aroused “Oh! If I could only have my dollie again how kind and gentle I would be to her.” The more they are to blame the less should we blame them — but rather by explanation seek to place the matter in such a light that they should blame themselves.

If you were to lose a child through your own carelessness the sting would only be embittered by any reproaches addressed to you by others. The more you realize that the fault was your own the more 7 sensitive would you be to the remarks of others upon the subject.

When therefore we know that a feeling of self-reproach has been aroused — it would be kindness to treat the matter as a sore subject — to be broached seldom and then only in

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the kindest and most sympathetic terms — inspiring the hope that — perhaps — at some future time — Santa Claus might entrust them with another baby — if — he felt convinced that they would love it and care for it — and treat it so that it should not die. In this way the child might be led to form for itself good resolutions concerning the future.

When we feel sure of the sincerity of these resolutions — Dolly No. 2 — could make its appearance.

Is this a long enough letter for you? Love to both babies and to their Mama.

Your loving husband, Alec. Mrs. A. Graham Bell, Washington, D. C.