

# **Giving Children a Sense of History**

## **Part 1:**

### **Building Up a Sense of Time in the Mind of a Child**

**by Sasha Johnson**

We all begin at the beginning, but as children, we are consumed with a sense of NOW. As we learn, we try to discern between NOW and THEN, but THEN remains rather fuzzy for a long time. The THEN of last week and the THEN of earlier today are pretty much summed up by the phrase “a long time ago,” as A. A. Milne begins his beloved children’s book: “Once upon a time, a very long time ago now, about last Friday, Winnie-the-Pooh lived in a forest all by himself under the name of Sanders.” Clearly, as children, our sense of time is thoroughly influenced by our sense of what is happening NOW.

But as we grow older, it becomes necessary for us to be more reflective and more imaginative in order to conceive of things outside of our own experience. We need to develop a more sophisticated sense of time. But how does one go about doing that?

I am not merely referring to time in the sense of the passing hours of the day or the skill of reading a clock. Nor do I mean the related skill of remembering what happened yesterday and that it did indeed happen yesterday and not today, that I made a trip two, not three, days ago, or that at least a month has gone by since I wrote a letter to somebody or other. This is still a wobbly skill for myself, I admit. And the more routine my life becomes, the more trouble I have putting events in the right place on the timeline.

When I think about this question, I’m thinking usually about all those things, but even more so, about building up a sense of the past—meaning past events which one has never experienced—imagining history and how things were once done, how long ago they were done, and how removed we are now from things which once were. That’s one of the primary projects which drives my choices in homeschooling; it’s that sense of time, of time passing, of *history* I’m trying to build up in the minds of my children. It’s a slender thread running through every discipline, whether it be science, architecture, or language.

Through conversations, through questions, through certain books or movies, I return to this question with my children, probing their imaginations, looking for progress, looking for change. How do they see the world, and what is their sense of time like, and how can I draw them towards a different perspective or build upon what they have?

Our house is a book-filled house, and we do what sometimes seems to be a tremendous number of bookish activities. We read aloud to each other and listen to audio books and read bedtime stories and mealtime stories and I’m-feeling-sick-today stories. So it’s only natural that I try to use literature to help my children develop a sense of the past, of how things were a little while ago, a long time ago, and a long, long time ago. This often involves reading books like *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*, *Robinson Crusoe* or *Prilgrim’s Progress*. During the process of reading the book, we stop and discuss the story and compare it with our own life to understand the difference between the way people were THEN compared with NOW.