

Family Council

Editors note: The Family Council consists of a judge, a psychiatrist, three clergymen, three editors and a women's editor. Each article is a summary of a family disagreement presented to the Council. The Council deals with problems, major and minor, encountered by guidance counselors and social workers. Edited by Mrs. Alma Henry. Copyright by General Features Corp.

Mrs. V.R. - Here his whole life revolves around numbers, yet he won't help his own son with arithmetic.

Mr. V.R. - I'd confuse Alfie. I learned arithmetic 30 years ago. I don't know the modern methods.

Mrs. V.R. - School has just started and Alfie is already having trouble with his fourth-grade arithmetic. The child is advanced for his age. He's not quite 9. But he's having a terrible time with long division. I'd try to help him myself, but I figure that's one area where his dad is a natural and I should stay out of it. My husband is a certified public accountant, and arithmetic is his daily work. He can give Alfie a grasp of it all, including long division, fractions, decimals and the rest.

But he refuses. He makes some excuses about not knowing modern methods. As long as the answer comes out right, the method doesn't matter. I think he's just too lazy to buckle down to teaching Alfie.

Mr. V.R. - Now, look, I'm no pedagogue. I learned my figures 30 years ago at a very strict British public school, where they rapped by knuckles when I made a mistake. I'm sure that's not the way my wife would like Alfie taught, although personally I think it has its merits. You concentrate and learn fast.

But I've looked at his text and his workbook. I can see that they approach long division backwards, sort of creep up on it. I can't bother with that. Besides, as I've said, I'm not good at making things clear to a child. I tried showing Alfie how to fly a kite and I wound up getting impatient with him, scolding him and making him cry.

He probably hates kites now. Why should I make him hate arithmetic, too?

The Council - We agree with Mrs. R. that a smart Dad like Mr. R. ought not go to "waste" what's his homework time in Alfie's day. It seems unnatural for him to hold back his knowledge. His problem is to hold back his temper, his impatience.

"Blood is thicker," is often the conclusion of a parent or relative who tries to teach a formal subject to a member of his family. He may be fine giving piano lessons to strangers, but he finds it hard to resist and deliver with his nearest of kin. Why? Because the air is rife with distracting emotion.

Add to that, Mr. V's misgivings as to proper "methods" and we can understand his hesitation to step in where school teachers fail his son. But arithmetic is so basic and essential a tool that "all's fair" if it leads to Alfie's attaining a mastery over number relationships.

Actually many adults with no pedagogical background at all are now being enlisted by Parent-Teacher groups and other volunteer organizations as after-school tutors to help children keep up with others in their class. "Homework helpers" are much in demand in settlement houses and recreation centers. And of course paid coaching is available from the undergrads at an nearby college.

Our suggestion to Mr. R. is to give it a whirl. Pretend you're Alfie, punch - drunk from problems. Start him off with something simple, like how many ice-cream sodas at 29 cents each can you buy for a dollar? If your forebrain wears too thin, or Alfie kids around too much, here's our next suggestion: find a neighbor to tutor him. If the neighbor has a child, you can swap pupils. You'll probably succeed famously with somebody else's child, as he will with yours.

Otherwise, hire a patient, plodding "explainer" for Alfie. It may not require many private sessions and the rewards will be lasting. Alfie will not be bowed down too long with a sense of hopelessness. And before long he'll feel like the worthy son of a numerical wiz of a dad, talking the same language.

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