

ODD ANGLES

THIRTY-THREE MATHEMATICAL ENTERTAINMENTS

CHARLES F. LINN

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WHY PARENTS CAN'T ADD

ART BUCHWALD

Mr. Buchwald is one of the more effective people presently trying to keep matters in perspective—that is, keep his head when all around him, people are losing theirs. In his regular columns in the newspapers, he pokes fun at most everyone, from the President down to the lowliest bureaucrat, and at most everything, including the New Math. Perhaps you'll recognize some of the strange business which confuses him in this little essay.

There has been a great deal of discussion about American education in the last ten years and everyone has come up with his theory as to why Johnny can't add. I know why Johnny can't add. It's because his parents can't do his homework.

In the old days before N.M. (New Math) a kid could bring home his homework and his parents would go over it with him, making corrections or suggestions, and giving encouragement when the going got rough. But today the parent is in the soup because the homework is so complicated that neither the kid nor his parent knows what is going on.

For example, the other day my daughter brought home a homework assignment.

"I have to subtract 179 from 202," she said.

"It's quite simple," I said, "you put the 202 over the 179."

"But what do I do with the 10?"

"What 10?"

"The 10 that goes next to the 202."

"I don't know what 10 goes next to the 202. Let's subtract 179 from 202. Nine from two is three, and you carry one. Eight from zero is two. The answer is 23."

"We can't do it that way. We have to use a 10."

"Why 10?"

"Ten is a unit."

"I see. Well, the answer is still 23," I said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I took nine from two and eight from zero."

"That's not the way to do it."

"Oh, yeah? Well, that's the way I did it."

"My teacher says you can't take nine from two."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't borrow from something you don't give back."

"Well, I'm going to call your teacher and see how she subtracts 179 from 202."

I placed a call to my daughter's teacher and explained I was having a small problem with the homework she had assigned.

The teacher was very nice on the phone. "It's really quite simple," she said. "The two in the right-hand column is considered units of one. The zero in the center counts for zero tens. The two in the left-hand column counts for hundreds. Therefore, you have two hundreds, zero tens, and two ones."

"You're putting me on," I said.

“Now to subtract,” she said. “Go to the hundreds column and start regrouping. Two hundred will become 100. Therefore, bring this 10 to the tens column. Now you have 10 tens, but you still can’t subtract in the units column. Therefore, regroup again. Now you only have nine tens. Take 12 from the 10 and now bring it over to the ones column because 10 ones equal one. Now you have 12 ones. Do you understand?”

“What’s there not to understand?” I said. “Can I ask you a very, very personal question?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Is the answer 23?”

“In this case it is, but it isn’t necessarily 23. If you were working in units other than 10, it could be something else.”

I hung up and started swallowing a whole bottle of aspirin, but my wife caught me in time. “How many aspirins did you take?” she asked.

“I took seven and then I took five, but don’t ask me what it adds up to.”