

## “But I never took logic!”

### Equipping Parents to Help Their Children with Subjects They Never Studied

by Brittany DeVos

Education can be a mysterious realm in our society. Specialized degrees and certificates. Expensive classes to excel at the fill-in-the-blank must-take standardized test. Jargon that only those few blessed initiated can comprehend. So, is it any wonder that parents can experience confusion and frustration when they attempt to participate in their children's educations?

A recent study in the United Kingdom found that 83% of parents need assistance helping their children with homework. Just having their parents attempt to help them confused over half of the kids questioned, while 81% of the parents themselves were open to receiving guidance on how better to aid their child's learning.<sup>1</sup> If parents in general face confusion on how to help their kids with subjects they themselves took when in school, how much more must the parents who choose classical Christian education and its specialized curriculum feel puzzled when little Suzie brings home Latin or logic or rhetoric for the first time?

This may, at first, seem an odd question given the impetus which many times inspires parents to choose classical Christian education. Mom and dad, through a friend or pastor or the internet, come across Dorothy L. Sayers' “The Lost Tools of Learning” address and read Sayers' masterful

summary of the principle issue in modern education: “Is not the great defect of our education today—a defect traceable through all the disquieting symptoms of trouble that I have mentioned—that although we often succeed in teaching our pupils ‘subjects,’ we fail lamentably on the

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whole in teaching them how to think: they learn everything except the art of learning.”<sup>2</sup>

“She’s got it!” the parents exclaim. “It’s not about ‘subjects’ at all. It’s about learning how to learn—how to think! This is what our child needs.” And nary a thought may be given again to subjects until the aforementioned day when little Suzie arrives home with the subject which mom and dad do not understand. How do we, as classical Christian educators, prepare our students’ parents for that day? How do we equip them to successfully help their children do homework and study subjects with which they have no prior experience?

I contend that the very tools of learning which we laud as the building blocks of our students’ education provide the structure their parents need to help them in their learning. The trivium—grammar, logic,

and rhetoric—form a useful technique for parents to assist their children in learning subjects that they never learned in school.

#### Grammar

Parents, like teachers, must begin at the beginning. John Milton Gregory writes in *The Seven Laws of Teaching*, “The language used in teaching must be common to teacher and learner. In other words, it must be understood by each, with

the same meaning to both.”<sup>3</sup> He elaborates, “Too often elementary facts and definitions are not made thoroughly familiar.”<sup>4</sup> Language, vocabulary, terms and definitions—these are the grammar of each subject where we should encourage parents to begin. A student will not be successful in his studies if he does not understand the terms used in class in the same way we the teachers understand them. Similarly, his mother and father will not be successful in helping him prepare for our class if they also do not have the same understanding. For this reason, parents of struggling students should drill them in vocabulary. What does *agricola* mean? What is the dative case? The ablative? Such drills require no prior training. With a textbook, study guide, or set of flashcards in front of them, any mom or dad can begin the process of making those elementary facts and definitions thoroughly familiar to their child.

Language itself is certainly not the only subject in which

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this approach works. Each field possesses its own required vocabulary and objective facts that must be learned. These are where parents must begin. What is the Pythagorean Theorem? What’s an integer? How about a syllogism? Who was Aeneas? Any question to which there is an objective, clear-cut answer is a question that can be asked by a well-meaning but untrained parent. When the drills are regular, both parent and student learn the terms. They are then ready for step two.

### Logic

This step in the process for parents is both easier and harder than the grammar step. It’s easier because there is only one question we need parents to ask their students, though it can be asked in many ways: “How are term A and term B related?” or “Compare and contrast term A and term B,” or “How does term A cause term B?” This second step examines relationships among the terms already studied. It’s required because logic is the process, in any area of study, of making connections, learning how the pieces fit together. So, it’s easier because it is all about relationship.

It’s harder because the students’ responses are not as objectively right or wrong as they are in the grammar step. Our parents’ anxiety may well up again at this stage—how can I know whether my kid understands these connections if I do not already understand them? But parents, like teachers, should never work harder than their kids.<sup>5</sup> The parents’ very question of how to know whether a student is correctly understanding relationships will lead the parents into the third step of the trivium technique.

### Rhetoric

Rhetoric may be defined as “an ability in each [particular] case to see the available means of persuasion.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, this is finding the way to prove your case. And, it is also the solution to

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*. . . by the time a parent works his child through these grammar, logic, and rhetoric steps of studying, the child should know not only the things he is studying and how they are related, but also how to explain them persuasively to others.*

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our parents’ dilemma in the logic step. A father need not have prior knowledge that A propositions and O propositions are related as contradictories in order to help his son with logic. He only needs to be armed with four simple words, “Prove it to me.” A mother doesn’t have to know that Aristotle associated the deliberative form of rhetoric with the future time period in order to prepare her daughter for a rhetoric test. She just needs to say, “Prove it to me.”

Those four words require the student to articulate why the relationships they explained in the logic step exist. That one sentence commands the student to communicate why his answer is true. It places the burden of work upon the student, not the parent. “That’s what the book says” is not a sufficient answer to this request, though it could be the start of one. By the time the student has persuaded his parent that he knows what he is talking about, he should be well prepared to answer any essay question that begins with the words *explain*,

related, but also how to explain them persuasively to others.

This trivium technique necessitates certain conditions. First, we must know that these steps will not work with a student who rebels against the parents’ involvement, who willfully lies or who ignores parents’ questions. Clearly, these discipline issues must be handled first before the parents can assist the child. Next, we must recognize that the initial teaching of concepts still must occur in the classroom. The parents have delegated that authority to us by placing their children in our school. We want to give them the tools to help their children succeed, but we must not expect the parents to do the teachers’ job. Finally, we must encourage our students’ parents in this process. It will be time consuming, and there still will be times of frustration and confusion. But if more parents in classical, Christian schools know that they do not have to be Latin scholars, or logic whizzes, or debate champions, to help their

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kids receive the education they desire them to have, then those times of confusion can become fewer and further between. And the students in our schools will have not only teachers, but also parents, constantly training them both in subjects and in the tools of learning when they sit in their homes, or walk in the way, or lie down, or rise up.<sup>7</sup>

### NOTES

1. Becta, “I’m stuck—can you help me? A report into parents’ involvement in school work at home,” 23 March 2010, <http://nextgenerationlearning.org.uk/stuckonschoolwork>.

2. Dorothy L. Sayers, “The Lost Tools of Learning,” <http://www.gbt.org/text/sayers.html>.

3. John Milton Gregory, *The Seven Laws of Teaching: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 54.

4. Ibid, 80.

5. Reference to Robyn R. Jackson’s *Never Work Harder than Your Students* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2009).

6. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37.

7. Paraphrase of Deuteronomy 6:7 (NKJV).



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