

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Cheaper by the Dozen

by

Frank B. Gilbreth

Book Information

Frank B. Gilbreth, Cheaper by the Dozen
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This true-life story chronicles the adventures of twelve wonderful redheaded rascals.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Family Life, Brothers; Family Life, Fathers; Family Life, Mothers; Family Life, Sisters; Humor/Funny, Funny

Main Characters

Anne, Mary, Ernestine, Martha, Lillian, Jane the Gilbreth girls

Dad the head of the Gilbreth family; an efficiency expert who attempts to run his household with as little wasted time as possible

Frank Jr., William, Fred, Dan, Jack, Bob the Gilbreth boys

Grandma Gilbreth Dad's mother

Grosie and Papa Mother's parents

Mother Dad's softhearted wife, who avoids disciplining the children

Tom Grieves the Gilbreth's handyman

Vocabulary

bedlam a place of noisy uproar and confusion

gall brashness or nerve

jowls the fleshy part under the lower jaw

painting an old-fashioned term for applying make-up

regimentation the process of creating a highly organized system

surreptitiously performed, made, or acquired by secret means

Synopsis

This humorous story is based on the true-life

accounts of the Gilbreths, a large family whose head, Dad, was a pioneer in the field of motion study. Dad Gilbreth's obsession with efficiency began when he was a young bricklayer quickly promoted after designing a scaffold dramatically increasing his speed.

Dad met mother while she was en route to Europe; soon after, they married and decided to have a large family. Dad initially holds a conviction that all his children will be girls, but has an evenly matched set of six girls and six boys. The family attracts a great deal of attention because of its large size, to the delight of Dad and the chagrin of Mother.

Dad applies his principles of efficiency to family life. For example, he regularly blows a whistle to assemble them for roll call and uses dinnertime as an instructional period to prevent wasted time. Dad's organization even extends to assigning jobs for the children to carry out while riding in Foolish Carriage, the family's Pierce Arrow automobile. When Mother takes the children to visit her parents while Dad is stationed in Oklahoma during World War I, her parents think their regimented behavior is unnatural. Very quickly, however, they make themselves at home and act like normal children.

One of Dad's experiments with motion study involves surgery. He volunteers to have his children's tonsils removed while the surgeries are filmed. The surgeries are never actually filmed, however, because Mr. Coggins, the photographer, forgets to remove the lens cap.

As the children grow up, Dad has difficulty accepting new things. He refuses to allow the girls to dress in silk stockings or short dresses and often threatens to send them to a convent. Little by little, however, Anne, the oldest daughter, convinces Dad to be more lenient. She is unhappy, though, when he decides to chaperone her school dances and dates. As the task begins to become a burden to him, he then sends Frank Jr. or Bill in his place.

Near the end of the book, the authors reveal that Dad has known for a long time that he has had a

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heart condition and the doctor had told him he would die. This is one of the reasons he has been so insistent on having the household running efficiently; he wants to lessen the load for Mother after he dies. Dad dies shortly thereafter, and the remaining family votes to help Mother continue Dad's business by working together and making sacrifices.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Dad thinks all the comments about his large family are funny and often has remarks of his own to add. Why do you think Mother is not amused when someone mistakes them for an orphanage?

Mother is most likely embarrassed that anyone would assume her children have no parents to look after them. She might also be concerned people think they can not take care of their large family. She would prefer people not think the worst or pity the children.

Literary Analysis

Dad has two very distinct sides. While he is regimented and wastes little time, he also has a less serious, humorous side. What are some examples of these characteristics? How would you feel if he were your father?

Dad brings his family together with a whistle call, and he holds roll calls using a stopwatch to time his children in various activities. The children must keep a chart of their personal responsibilities (brushing teeth, bathing, etc.). On the other hand, he shows his lighter side when he laughs at a good joke. For example, he drives the family to a very run-down home claiming it is their new house and enjoys making comments about his children being "cheaper by the dozen." Students might respond that having him as their father would be irritating because of his "motion study" experiments. Though they might enjoy his humor to a point, they would probably prefer playing jokes on him. He is a character easy to love and to be frustrated with at the same time.

Inferential Comprehension

The Gilbreths have six girls and six boys. How would circumstances be different in the household if there had been a majority of either gender?

A majority of one gender over another would create some interesting situations. Family Council meetings might find a majority vote held with either the boys or girls, which could cause problems if it occurred often. Also, bedrooms and bathrooms would be divided differently. Doing household chores could create a problem as well, with boys doing "girl's work" and vice-versa, and more girls would create more stress for Dad in regards to clothing, dating, and make-up.

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Constructing Meaning

After Dad's death, the children agree to try to make it on their own, so Mother does not have to move the family to California. What kinds of adjustments do you think the Gilbreth children will have to make?

The children will have to take more responsibility upon themselves. They will need to share the household load, so Mother can concentrate on the motion study business. They may have to forgo "extras" they have been accustomed to in their lives. Special attention will need to be given to Mother to help her cope with Dad's death, and they will need to learn to put aside petty arguments.

man is the cat's, all right." What does this mean? Have students research and make a list of twenty slang terms used during this time period. They should create cards, one showing the term and another identifying its meaning. Students can play a "Concentration" or "Memory" type game with the cards.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Part of the story occurs during the early 1920's. The children love to listen to jazz music. Have students identify and research several of the musicians associated with this era, known as the Jazz Age. Also, Dad enjoys taking the children to the movies. Ask students to identify and research well-known movies of this time, as well as actors and actresses. Have students present their information in the form of an entertainment magazine or television show.

Comparing and Contrasting Dad has the children keep "process and work charts." Discuss this idea with students and have them keep a daily log of their household routines and how long it takes to accomplish them. Brainstorm with students to compile a list of common tasks. Keep the log for one week. When logs are complete, have students compile data and create graphs comparing their results.

Describing Actions or Events Dad is stationed in Oklahoma during the First World War. Have students research the events leading up to this war. Once events have been compiled, create a timeline with dates and illustrations for each event.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning The 1920's were rich with slang. In chapter seven, Dad is described in the following way: "Gee, your old