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# Life Support: Mom's little deductions

Children in the tax office only add to the stress

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Daniel, a friendly tax preparer at H&R Block's Monroeville location, believes I'm insane. Doing your taxes is already stressful when you know you need a certain amount of refund for your household to break even. Bringing your children with you to the tax office sends that stress to a new level. But for many parents like us, it makes no sense logistically or financially to hire a baby sitter for half an hour.



Steve Thomas, Post-Gazette

So with us they come.

In the car on the way, we talk frankly with the children. "We know you are going to be bored. Really bored. But it is very important that you are well-

behaved at this place we're going to, because taxes are very serious. Everyone who works has to do taxes every year, and people who don't get in big trouble."

Seven-year-old Annie (a fan of other people being in big trouble) asks enthusiastically, "You mean they can go to JAIL?"

"Jail, flail, drail, oh yeah, lalalalalalaaaaaa," sings 5-year-old Simon.

We all hold hands on the way inside the tax office. I remind the kids to please, please, please sit quietly and be as good as they can, even though they'll be bored. Daniel greets us promptly and we begin handing him our little stack of paperwork. The children begin squirming. Soon, Simon wants to sit under the table and play.

Fine, I tell him, just stay away from that power strip over there. Annie is jealous that Simon gets to sit under the table and begins to kick him. Through gritted teeth, I break the No Bribes Code and offer the children dessert if they behave. Simon is soon exploring the contents of Daniel's trash can, and Annie is repeatedly saying, "Mommy, I'm bored!"

My hand is over my eyes when I realize that everyone is looking at me, waiting for a response.

"I'm sorry?" I ask.

Daniel continues, "Do you have any student loans, Mrs. McDonald?" A simple enough question...

"No. I don't. I don't have a college degree. I dropped out because I got pregnant. I am an uneducated, underemployed smart person who left high school in the top 20 percent but who has absolutely no college degree."

Pause. "But I'm not bitter." Daniel's eyes widen. He nods and types "N."

By the time we have completed the process, it is evident that we're getting a substantially lower refund than last year. Daniel dutifully calls up last year's return, in case there's anything we can use to change this year's figures. Simon's hand appears from under the table, and he proceeds to do a puppet show for the people above the table using his Curious George mittens. Annie tugs on my husband's sleeve, desperate to play with his Palm Pilot. I finally crack.

"Look," I say, "I appreciate that you're trying to figure out why the refund is lower, and you're doing a good job, but as long as we know what the figure is,

can we just deal with it and get things moving here? They're restless and I'm caring less and less about why it's lower..."

Daniel has one child at home, six weeks old. I wonder what he's thinking about his future as Simon repeatedly knocks his head against the leg of the table with a thud, thud, thud.

"My name's spelled S-I-M-O-N," he tells Daniel. "My birthday is April 8, and I have a loose tooth, and I had diarrhea at school today."

"Mommy why are you talking about me and Simon with the tax man?" Annie asks loudly.

"Because we can't just tell the government we have kids so we can pay less taxes; we have to prove we have kids, and we have to list your names and birthdays and social security numbers, which is a number you get when you're born."

There, my sweet little tax deduction, quietly wrap your brain around that one awhile.

"Hey tax man!" she yells without missing a beat. "Do any people's social acurdity numbers have all zeroes in them?"

"Yes. Dead people," says my husband. That shuts her up pretty quick, her eyes as wide as pies.

All in all, we realize later over ice cream sundaes, the kids didn't behave nearly as badly as they could have. Daniel deserves a gold star for the day.

Though we realize it's not Daniel's fault, my husband and I are disappointed in our refund, and we both have pens and calculators out, frantically trying to re-swizzle our finances as our ice cream melts. As fudge runs down Simon's chin and Annie tells on him for it, we realize that our too-small refund is at least big enough to hire a baby sitter while we're doing our taxes next year.