

Ask Marilyn

I will never read your column again.

—Eric Gatterdam, Tucson, Ariz.

I have lost nearly all my faith in you.

—Douglas Kraft, Notre Dame, Ind.

I can only conclude that you are not woman enough to face the truth and admit your mistake. You are highly intelligent, and that is an admirable quality, but high intelligence coupled with an unwillingness to admit a mistake is unforgivable.

—Leonard Haefele, Overland Park, Kan.

It really puzzles and frustrates me that, despite your great perspicacity, you are unable to see that your answer to the "man and woman each with two children" problem is wrong.

—J.H. Wuller, St. Louis, Mo.
You are wrong. This is borne out by the application of Bayes' rule to the probability structure you imposed, and in the inner refinement functionality as given in the Dempster-Shafer theory of evidential reasoning.

—Dave Ferkinhoff, Middletown, R.I.

I was horrified to read that one of your few supporters was an engineer responsible for assessing risks in the operation of nuclear power plants. I sometimes wonder why critics of IQ testing don't point to some of your work as vivid examples of the vast difference between IQ and logic.

—Robert Williamson, Knoxville, Tenn.

As an anti-nuclear activist, I find it both scary and humorous that a person with a Ph.D. in nuclear engineering who once managed the performance of probabilistic safety analyses of nuclear power plants thinks you are correct.

—Ben Davis Jr., Sacramento, Calif.

I guess the real hope is that the nuclear engineer wasn't paying very close attention when she offered her assent, or else the next problem will involve three-eyed children.

—Jason Zeamon, White Bear Lake, Minn.



VANT
That question about a woman and a man, each with two children, is causing controversy again. But this time our women readers are asked to participate, and \$1000 is on the line.

I am writing to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to suggest that any power plants approved for operation by Jennifer Adams be closed immediately.

—Russell Redgate, Marstons Mills, Mass.

This is not going to go away until you admit that you are wrong, wrong, wrong!!!

—Pearl Meibos, Salt Lake City, Utah

You are not the only genius to base logic on a faulty major premise. Einstein did it more than once.

—Margaret-Mary del Tufo, North Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Even the Bulls lose one every once in a while.

—Chris Rowley, Frisco, Tex.

I will send \$1000 to your favorite charity if you can prove me wrong. The chances of both the woman and the man having two boys are equal.

—Eldon Moritz, Arlington, Tex.

You're on, Eldon! If you are wrong, you'll donate \$1000 to the American Heart Association. If I'm wrong, I'll donate \$1000 to that association. Rather than explain my reasoning again, let's just put it to the test. Here's the original problem:

"A woman and a man (unrelated) each have two children. At least one of the woman's children is a boy, and the man's older child is a boy. Do the chances that the woman has two boys equal the chances that the man has two boys?"

I said the chances that the woman has two boys are 1 in 3 and the chances that the man has two boys are 1 in 2. The letter-writers agree with me about the man. But they disagree with me about the woman. Instead, they say the chances that the woman has two boys are 1 in 2 (just like the man's chances).

Readers, here's how you can help prove which answer about the woman is correct. To my women readers: If you have exactly two children (no more), and at least one of them is a boy (either child or both of them), write—or send e-mail—and tell me the sex of both of your children. Don't consider their ages.

In other words, it's fine to write if your older child is a boy and your younger child is a girl. It's also fine to write if your older child is a girl and your younger child is a boy. And it's fine to write if both of your children are boys. I need to hear from all of you (but only if you have two children and no more).

We'll publish the results in an upcoming column.