

Math tips for parents

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Breathe. Your past experiences with math are not the same as your child's, and your own experiences with mathematics now can be different from those you had in school. You may be surprised at how much easier it is to understand math away from the social pressures or performance expectations of the classroom.

Try looking at a math concept as you might watch a play or read a book. Give yourself time to understand the whole story. Come back to it multiple times and look at it from different perspectives. Give yourself as much time as it takes to solve the problem in front of you. Remember, this isn't a race or a competition.

Treat math like yoga, cooking, playing an instrument or a doing a martial art: realize that with practice, you can master the parts that are purely skills. The parts that are not skills can be appreciated even if they cannot be mastered. Set aside some time for practising math every day.

Work with your kids on math starting in Grade 1, and relearn math as they learn. This way, when they come to you with Grade 8 homework, you will be prepared. Don't assume that your child is learning a math skill the same way you learned it in school; chances are that she's not. Have her explain how they tackled a problem in class and try to support her in that strategy. The goals of mathematics education may have changed since you stumbled through learning the steps of long division. The focus in today's classrooms is on understanding and using the concepts, not just memorizing the how-to steps. Progressive educators take students from the concrete to the abstract. Think kinesthetic (hands-on), verbal, or visual learning first, paper and pencil later. Move those blocks, dice, or paper clips around before you write down the math equation on paper. Remember, numbers are just symbols we use to represent what happens around us. As often as you can, help your child see mathematics as skills about ideas, logic, problem solving, patterns, and tools to make sense out of our world.

Be positive and encouraging. Really believe that your child can learn to love math and your confidence will be contagious. If your child is struggling, do not say, "I always hated math, too." Or, "I wasn't good at math, either." Or, "I know it's useless, but you have to do it." Children will take on their parents' attitudes. If Mom says she couldn't do it, then a child may believe her fate is already spelled out the same. It is never too late for you to learn.

Work out math problems together. Don't be embarrassed! Contact your child's teacher for guidance. Search online for a video about the topic in question.

It may be difficult for you to go through this process if you have your own emotional baggage about math, but it would provide excellent modelling of self-confidence, perseverance, and problem-solving. If sticking it out isn't possible for you when your child gets into higher grades, look for outside support for your child. Find a relative or friend who is comfortable with math, or a professional tutor.