

# Students Need Math Help – from YOU

**Instill a Love of Math:** By Laura Lewis Brown

*Parents are bombarded with messages to read with their children, but it's rare to hear about the importance of doing math with them. Here are some helpful tips on why and how to instill a love of math in your children.*

## Early Math Matters

We may take for granted that our children will inevitably learn how to add, subtract, multiply and divide, but **early math lessons establish the base for the rest of their thinking lives**.



“Mathematics that kids are doing in kindergarten, first, second and third grades lays the foundation for the work they are going to do beyond that,” says Linda Gojak, president of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM). “They are learning beyond just counting and numbers.” That’s why it’s so important to help children love math while they are still young. Parents can build on those first preschool lessons by counting with their children, asking them to look for patterns and recognize shapes, then moving on to numbers, Gojak says.

The goal should be to make math “real” and meaningful by pointing it out in the world around you. That could include checking and comparing prices at the grocery store, driving down the street counting mailboxes, reading recipes, calculating coupons, or even measuring food or drink at the dinner table. Kevin Mahoney, math curriculum coordinator at Pennacre Country Day School in Wellesley, Mass., says when his children were little, his wife kept a small measuring tape in her pocketbook. While they were waiting for their order at a restaurant, the children would measure different items on the table.



Just as you encourage your early reader to look for familiar letters, ask your child to watch for math, regarding math as highly as you do reading. “**Every parent knows that it’s a good idea to read to your child every night, but they should also realize the importance of talking about mathematical situations with children every day,**” says Mahoney.

## *So - What If It's Hard?*

*What if you hated math as a child?* Parents should try to *set aside their distaste for math* and encourage their children as much as possible. Young children are eager to learn. “It’s hard to learn to talk or walk. But they don’t care,” says Sue VanHattum, a community college math teacher in Richmond, Ca., who blogs about math learning on [www.mathmamawrites.blogspot.com](http://www.mathmamawrites.blogspot.com). “They just push themselves over their limits. They are going to come at math with that same attitude.”

*Avoid talking negatively about*

*math*, even if you have no need for

trigonometry in your daily life. “A lot of people will only joke that they cannot do math or announce publicly, ‘I’m not a math person.’ When a parent does that in front of a child, **it suggests that math’s not**

**important,**” says Char Forsten, education consultant and writer, who urges parents to create that desire to learn by constantly screening the environment for math. “Have you seen any good math lately?” she likes to ask students.

If your child believes that math doesn’t really matter, he’s not going to be as open to learn. “*Attitude has everything to do with learning.* You can’t



make anyone learn. If a child has learned not to love math, if they don’t love math, and aren’t willing to learn, you have to deal with that first,” Forsten says.

If you are stuck on how to foster math enthusiasm, talk to your child’s teacher about some ways to support math learning at home. There may be a new game that you have never heard of, which both you and your child will love.



## Play Games

With so many facts and figures to memorize and apply to math problems, children learn early that math is something that requires work. That doesn't mean that it can't be fun; keep the pleasure in math by playing games with your children. Many games, even the ones adults' play, rely on math. With countless websites, computer games and phone apps, parents have endless options, but don't forget about the non-digital games you loved as a child. The classics that require manipulating cards and game pieces, calculating along the way, may have the same appeal for your kids as they did for you. One game worth considering is Chutes and Ladders. A 2009 study conducted by Carnegie Mellon and the University of Maryland, found that preschoolers who played the game improved math skills significantly compared to those in the study who played a different board game or did non-math tasks.



As you play with your kids, try to tap into your own love for math. When you play Trivial Pursuit, you are using math to determine how many spaces you need to get to the next wedge or predict which category you can answer best. The game doesn't have to be about math, but should involve it. If you have a good game store in your area, stop by and ask the salespeople for help. Some of VanHattum's favorite games really push logic, which is the basis of math, and get children thinking visually. Check out Link, SET, Rush Hour, Blokus and Spot It, to name a few.



“Playing games is a great family activity,” VanHattum says. “The more you have a tradition of playing games, the easier it is to bring in other games you like.” So while you may not be passionate about your child's latest board game, you can work up to another game you like. Try to make the game personal to your family by playing it in your own special way. “Mathematicians ‘make up’ their own rules,” VanHattum says. “It's really important to be open to making up your own games. Change the rules. ‘In our family, we play the game this way.’”



## *Flexing Math Muscles*

Riding a bike, swimming in the deep end, and playing an instrument are just examples of our favorite childhood activities that require **practice** to master. *So does math.*



“Math is an intellectual muscle building; it’s crucial for fully developing a child’s potential,” Mahoney says. “Those muscles can atrophy. *If school is the only place you do math, then it becomes something you only do at school.* Then you don’t even think about using it in real life.” So brush off those negative feelings about math and instill enthusiasm. Math will play a role in your child’s life forever.

“It’s important to remember that those basics are essential for later learning. A lot of the stuff we learn in math we apply in different ways later,” says Gojak, who emphasizes the thinking skills that math provides. “I might not have to worry about what an isosceles triangle is, but it’s still an important part of education.”

As they grow, kids will learn that they are willing to work hard at something they love. It may just be math. Either way, remember that your child does not have to excel at math to enjoy it. “It doesn’t matter if they’re good, it matters whether they like it,” VanHattum says.

