

Title: How to conquer *math* fear.

Subject(s): [ARITHMETIC -- Study & teaching](#); [MATHEMATICAL readiness](#)

Source: [Family Life, Sep99, p45, 3p](#)

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Abstract: Provides tips for parents on how to help children conquer their fear of mathematics. Past experiences as a possible cause of *anxiety*; Guiding the child gently through the problem at hand; Use of positive reinforcement in a homework; Teaching of *math* concepts as a way to boost a child's confidence in the subject. INSET: *Math* support for girls.

AN: 2168205

ISSN: 1072-9332

Full Text Word Count: 1397

Database: Academic Search Premier

HOW TO CONQUER *MATH* FEAR

You can help your child love numbers, even if you don't

It was time for my kindergartner to expand her mathematical horizons. After spending nearly two years successfully negotiating Level One of her favorite software program, I suggested that perhaps she was ready to try Level Two. "Oh, no, Mommy, I can't do that," she cried, panic in her eyes. Why? "I'd have to do arithmetic!"

Though vocabulary is her strength, it didn't get her off the hook here. "Okay," I said, "What's two plus three?" encouraging her to count on her fingers.

"Five!" she proudly replied.

"See, you can do arithmetic!"

"That's arithmetic?" she gasped.

If only all *math* fears could be so handily dispatched! Whether your child panics at the thought of adding fractions or figuring the volume of a sphere, *math* fear can be conquered. All it takes is a little empathy, a lot of patience, and a desire to get to the root of the problem.

"*Anxiety* generally stems not from lack of ability, but from past experience," says Charles Springer, a seventh-grade *math* teacher in Williamsburg, VA. It may have started when your child was asked to solve a problem at the blackboard by himself. Perhaps he was ridiculed for getting the wrong answer in class. Or it could be the memory of that test that made his palms sweat and his mind go blank. Whatever the source, the *math* phobic usually believes that he simply cannot do *math*, that he lacks something that helps his peers succeed.

So what can you do when your child comes to you, frustrated, upset, and ready to give up? "Give him a hug," suggests Patricia Kenschaft, Ph.D., professor of mathematics at Montclair State University and author of *Math Power: How to Help Your Child Love Math Even If You Don't* (\$15, Perseus Press). "Let him know that he is not in this alone. Assure him that *math* is hard, and while he can't just stop feeling frustrated, he can stop beating up on himself."

The next step is to guide him gently through the problem at hand. Ask him what he already knows and help him find the solution himself. "The child has to learn not only the *math*, but the process of enjoying the discovery," adds Kenschaft. The more he experiences that joy, the less anxious he will become.

What's your *math* score?

A little positive reinforcement may get you and your child through tonight's homework, but you'll have to do more to abolish *math* fear. You don't need to be a *math* whiz, but you do need an open mind and the ability to enjoy learning along with your child. In fact, if you simply tell her how to solve the problem, you will rob her of the pride of finding the solution. Instead, ask questions, be attentive, and let your child teach you. Teaching *math* concepts to others, says Kenschaft, not only develops the child's ability, it also boosts her confidence. Springer agrees: "A good way to learn is to experiment. But the best way is to teach it to someone else."

That's good news for some of us parents who may have lived a few lifetimes since tackling a quadratic equation. But what if the sight of all those X's and Y's makes our eyes glaze over and our hearts do the cha-cha in our throats? "Parents owe it to their children not to show their own *math anxiety*," advises Sheila Tobias, an author and educator who has studied *math* as a feminist issue since the 1970s. "Children mimic, identify with, and take on the attributes of their parents. Parents must work on their own *math* fear."

If you suspect that you might be passing along your *anxiety* or avoidance to your child, identify its source and assess its severity. If your case is mild, triggered by a few decades of a relatively *math*-free life, pick up *Solve Your Child's Math Problems: Quick and Easy Lessons for Parents*, by Patricia D. Nordstrom (\$22, Parachute Press). It will get you up-to-date on what your child is learning--from fractions to factorials. If the *math* lessons in that book traumatize you, you may want to try Tobias's *Overcoming Math Anxiety* (\$13, W.W. Norton & Company). However, if your *anxiety* is deeply ingrained and your time is short, you may have to hide it from your child. Use it to empathize with his distress, but be careful not to reinforce his fear with your own.

Try a little help from friends

Another way to calm nerves is to make *math* a group endeavor. Often when the pressure of finding the answer alone is lifted, children feel free to experiment, have fun, and get wrong answers. And as your child watches her peers struggling, she will discover that other kids are plagued by many of the same problems--that alone can be very reassuring. So ask two or three of your child's friends to come over once a week to do *math* homework. "It's always good for children to have an after-school *math* activity," says Tobias, "preferably something informal, with lots of talk." And it's a great opportunity for "*math* speak," something girls especially lack

in their lives. "To learn *math* you've got to talk about it and think about it," adds Kenschaft. "As you speak, so you learn."

If the homework sessions work well, you may want to add some *math* games and activities of your own. The Annenberg/CPB *Math* and Science Project sells videos, activity guides, and worksheets designed for parents to share with their children (call 800-965-7373 for a catalog). And the workbook series Family *Math* (\$19, Equals Publications, University of California at Berkeley) has hundreds of hands-on activities for kids, using food and other household items (for information call 800-897-5036 or visit their website at equals.lhs.berkeley.edu).

Some cases of *math* misery are more chronic. Don't give up; help your child confront the negative voices that are defeating him. Have him keep a *math* journal to pinpoint the causes of his distress. Or try this tip from Tobias: Have your child fold a piece of scratch paper in half vertically before he starts working. On the right side, he should try to solve the problem. When he hits a roadblock, have him write down his thoughts on the left. Not only will this process root out those discouraging voices, it will also keep him scribbling, and that alone can help. If he stays on a task long enough, he is more likely to solve the problem himself. Nothing conquers *math* fear like success.

If your child continues to have a debilitating aversion to *math*, don't wait to get professional help. Your child may need more than your encouragement to succeed. Your school's guidance counselor should be able to direct you to a tutorial service or a *math* counselor. Today's parents may have been able to avoid *math* for most of their lives, but our children do not have that luxury. More and more careers require *math* skills or computer understanding. So make sure your child feels comfortable asking questions when he does not understand. Help him accept his mistakes and move on. As Tobias reminds us: "The people who lose are not those who are wrong, but those who give up."

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By Davina Parmet

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#### Inset Article

### ***MATH* SUPPORT FOR GIRLS**

*Math* class has not always been a welcoming place for girls. A 1992 report by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) found that girls' learning needs were often ignored in the classroom. But a follow-up report in 1997 found that things are improving. After a decade of raising awareness and changing curricula, more girls than ever are taking geometry, algebra, and calculus. Though the highest test scores still tend to go to boys, girls are catching up.

- Still, the *math* gap, though diminished, remains. And the emerging gap between boys and girls in the area of computer science and technology is alarming. One of the best ways to bridge those gaps is by supplementing girls' classroom experience with special *math* projects, extracurricular activities, even summer *math* camps.

- For *math* programs for girls in your area, contact the AAUW ([www.aauw.org](http://www.aauw.org), or 800326-AAUW). Girls Inc. ([www.girlsinc.org](http://www.girlsinc.org)) runs Operation SMART (for Science, *Math* and Relevant Technology), a national program that encourages girls to take risks.