

Math Help: Why is My Child Struggling in Math?

Parents often ask why their children are doing poorly in math, particularly in grades 2-6. For young children, abstract quantities can be daunting, especially when taught in the context of skill drills. Many children do not find immediate meaning in numbers as symbols, although that is what parents and math teachers hope to convey to them. Children in third through fifth grades who are having difficulty with procedural operations, such as long division and multi-digit multiplication, very often have not had any kinetic activity associated with the learning of the multiplication tables which are the basis for their computations. They become distracted from the procedures of multiplication and division by their concern over the "blank space" in their knowledge of multiplication tables and they lose momentum. Parents often say that they download tables from the Internet or they use flash cards. Another, perhaps better, alternative is to provide art and craft materials for the student to use in writing his or her own personal multiplication tables. When the tables are personalized and used frequently with pride and familiarity, students gain in experience, confidence and expertise. Children tend to enjoy having their own personally crafted multiplication tables from 1x1 through 12x12. They use these with pride and confidence. Even taking them to the supermarket to compute the total cost of multiple items will help to make the applications of arithmetic real and valued to a child. Making a child's learning experiential is of utmost importance in creating interest in math and developing skills. Many are not aware of the essential uses of elementary mathematical and spatial concepts in daily lives. Heightening awareness of these events is essential to pointing them out to children and sharing experience with them. Just as parents read to our children, so should they communicate a reliance on mathematical principles. This may vary from family to family depending on individual pursuits and interests. For some families whose common interest is sports competition, a short discussion of the role of sports statistics could make that dreaded skills homework more interesting and relevant to a child's life. Others may be interested in video games, which use computer programming that requires trigonometric applications. Cartoon animation programming uses principles of topology, the mathematics of mapping in space. Road trips and map reading are also mathematical adventures for parents to share with children. Topographical maps use numbers in an obvious way, while road maps with scale measurements open the discussion to ratios and scale. The history of measurement and attempts at standardization can become real when discussing money or the differences among the metric, imperial and U.S. measurement systems. Toddlers, even with a rudimentary understanding of concrete quantity, can enjoy games of "which is less and which is more?" Counting games and rhymes abound and have been traditionally used to accustom children to quantitative symbols even at very young ages. Perhaps the most useful tool of all in developing a child's math ability at an early age is precision in language. Most students who have experienced the "drill and kill" math experience in school are shocked when they start to solve math word problems as a mathematical exercise. These applications of the skills so long deemed to be the foundation of math education are daunting to children who have been trained to believe that mathematical studies begin and end with computation. If children learn mathematics as a foreign language, with symbols and grammar of its own, they are better able to handle the rigors of higher mathematics - with its whole new set of symbols and logic - and they are more productive students. Reading to a child, discussing concepts of "more and less," "before and after," "twice as much" and hierarchical classifications such as supermarket shelf organization and street name organization can pay off in a child's mathematical performance. Organization is the key to success in solving math problems. Giving a child adequate writing materials and encouraging him or her to experiment with blocking his work with designs to make it easier to read when he checks his work. Organizing work and establishing a rhythm for work is essential to success at problem solving. It is well worth the expense of large paper, markers and even colored pencils to establish the habit of conceptual organization. So it really is not all about numbers, but it is about the ability to organize, translate concepts and think inductively and deductively. Many skills and experiences contribute to those goals and - with parental involvement - children can improve their quantitative skills while enjoying the simple pleasures of life.

About the Author

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