

Building a Positive Relationship with Math: A Guide for Families

Simple, powerful ways to help your child grow in confidence, curiosity, and understanding

Math is more than just numbers on a page. It's a way of thinking, problem-solving, and making sense of the world. And just like reading or playing a sport, how a child feels about math can shape how they learn it. When children develop a positive relationship with math, one that includes confidence, curiosity, and a sense of belonging, they're more likely to persist through challenges and see themselves as capable mathematicians. As a family, you play an important role in shaping that relationship. The everyday messages you send, the space you create for mistakes and questions, and the connections you make to daily life all add up.

We have put together 7 meaningful ways to support a strong, healthy foundation in math at home:

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I. Foster a Growth Mindset

Let your child know that math ability isn't something fixed. It grows through effort, trying different strategies, and learning from challenges.

What this looks like:

Instead of focusing on whether they get the answer right the first time, focus on how they're thinking. Emphasize and praise effort and persistence.

Try this at home:

When your child says "I can't do this," try replying with "You can't do it yet. Let's figure out what part is tricky and if there is a part you can do. Try to remind your child of a time something was hard for them at first and how they eventually overcame the challenge. When your child accomplishes something rather than saying "you're so smart," say something like "I like how hard you worked at that" or "How did it feel when you finally accomplished it?" This helps them see themselves as capable learners who can improve with time and practice.

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2. Treat Mistakes as a Learning Opportunity

Mistakes can feel frustrating, but they are an essential part of learning math. They give us clues about what a child understands and what they're still figuring out. Research even shows that we learn more when we make a mistake than when we get something correct the first time

What this looks like:

Instead of jumping in to correct a mistake, get curious about your child's thinking. Teach your child about the value of learning mistakes.

Try this at home:

Talk to your child about how mistakes can actually grow their brain. When you do notice a mistake, say things like "How can you check your answer to see if it's correct" or "I think there might be a mistake somewhere here. Can you figure out where it is?" Children learn more when they identify and fix their own mistakes than if we point out and fix them for them. Sharing your own mistakes out loud and modeling how to work through them both in math and other areas of life will also help your child be more okay with making mistakes.

3. Notice Math in Everyday Life

Math shouldn't be just something that happens in a classroom or on a worksheet. It's part of how we navigate the world, from measuring and estimating to sorting and comparing.

What this looks like:

Talk about numbers, patterns, shapes, and logic during daily routines like cooking, cleaning, driving, or shopping.

Try this at home:

Ask your child to figure out how many plates are needed for dinner, estimate how many steps it takes to reach the mailbox, compare prices at the grocery store, or split up a snack fairly. These small moments can help children see that math is not just about copying a teacher's steps on the board.

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4. Be Mindful of How You Talk about Math (and Yourself)

Children learn from how the adults around them talk about math. If they hear messages like “I was never good at math,” they may begin to believe that some people just aren’t meant to be good at it. In fact, research has shown that children with parents who say “I’m not a math person” (Link) tend to do worse in math class. Be careful not to treat math as a chore or something they get a “break” from when on school breaks.

What this looks like:

Speak positively about math, even if it wasn’t your favorite subject. Share that it’s okay to find it challenging and that learning takes time.

Try this at home:

Instead of saying “I’m bad at math,” try “Math was tricky for me, but I’m learning new ways to think about it.” This helps your child see that struggling doesn’t mean you’re not a math person, it means you’re learning. Share times math was helpful to you in figuring something out.

5. Focus on Thinking, Not Speed

There’s a common belief that being good at math means being fast (Link). But rushing can get in the way of deep thinking and understanding. Emphasizing speed can take away the time children need to truly think about problems and potentially cause math anxiety.

What this looks like:

Allow your child time to make sense of problems. Encourage them to explain their reasoning, even if it takes a while. We’ve found it can be helpful to actually count to 30 seconds (or longer) in your head after asking a question. You might be surprised at how long that feels. Remind your child that they don’t have to be the fastest child in their class in order to be good at math.

Try this at home:

Let your child know it’s okay to pause and think. Ask questions like “What do you notice?” or “Can you show me how you figured that out?” This helps them value the process over quick answers. Model taking time for yourself, saying things like “Ooh this is a good question. I’m going to need some time to think about it.”

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6. Celebrate Math Play and Exploration

Math learning doesn't always have to look like solving equations. Playing with patterns, games, puzzles, and ideas builds reasoning and curiosity. Math can and should be fun and engaging. Shifting away from what we have traditionally thought of as “math” opens up a world of explanation and fun.

What this looks like:

Offer opportunities for open-ended exploration. Let your child tinker with materials, create their own problems, or ask “what if” questions. Play games that incorporate math together. Encourage and celebrate when they notice math in the world around them.

Try this at home:

Play games like Uno, card games, or Sudoku. Build structures with blocks or explore counting collections. Invite your child to invent their own rules or challenges using math.

7. Be a Partner, Not Just a Helper

You don't need to be a math expert to support your child. Engage with your child when they're working on math problems, but ask questions rather than telling them what to do next.

What this looks like:

Sit with your child and explore their thinking. Avoid the urge to give answers right away. Instead, guide them with questions and encouragement. Dig into learning the way they are learning math at school rather than taking over with how you may have learned to solve a problem when you were in school.

Try this at home:

Use phrases like “Let's figure this out together” or “That's an interesting way to start. What do you think comes next?” or “Show me how you've been working on problems like this at school.” Modeling patience and curiosity helps your child stay engaged and feel supported.