

# When You're Not a 'Math Person' and Your Kid Needs Help

How to support your children in home-school lessons that may be outside your skill set.

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Nearly all schoolwork is now homework, and many parents are struggling to support their kids at home.

And many of the parents who are able to squeeze in the time and feel equipped to help their kids with reading, for example, want to run in the other direction when it comes to math. Trying to recall long-forgotten concepts is challenging enough, and now most math content is being taught differently from the way it was, way back when. So if kids are confused, what can already beleaguered parents do to help?

To help children in elementary and middle school grades learn to think and solve problems for themselves, you don't have to have all the answers. A positive attitude can go a long way. As teachers and tutors who are also parents ourselves, here's our advice.

**Avoid telling your kids how much you hate math/used to hate math/were a terrible math student.** If kids hear your negative messaging, they are more likely to develop a poor long-term view both of math and of themselves as math students. Instead, emphasize that you understand that a problem is tricky and that what matters is that they work to solve it. The focus should be on the process of figuring it out.

**Pose questions to get your kids thinking for themselves.** You don't need to know the answers. Asking questions will lead kids in the right direction and allow them to take more ownership of their work. Regardless of the accuracy of the answer, don't tell your children if it's right or wrong off the bat. Instead — and in order to encourage deeper mathematical thinking — ask if their response makes sense and why.

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Ideas from The Times on what to read, cook, watch, play and listen to while staying safe **At Home**.



Guided questions to help your kids include: Can you talk me through your thinking? How do you know? Why does this make sense? It's better to have them explain to you what they've learned in class than for you to teach them shortcuts their teacher hasn't introduced.

**Encourage specificity.** Ask *which* part of the problem is confusing. Frustrated children may respond, "All of it." Start at the beginning of the problem and try to have them talk their way through the parts that are unclear. Even if you can't help explain the material, you or your kids will be able to share with their teacher what specific step or concept it is that's causing frustration. For example, if children appear to be struggling with an entire word problem, the issue may not be that they don't understand what the problem is asking and how to approach it, rather specific confusion about how to divide multi-digit numbers.

**Regardless of the specific math challenge, parents should encourage their kids to:**

**Rephrase what the question is asking.** When kids feel stuck, they should start off by restating the question by putting it into their own words. In order to correctly answer a question, they need to be able to understand both what is being asked and what information has already been provided to help figure it out.

**Visualize and draw pictures.** Especially when it comes to geometry and word problems, drawing a quick sketch labeled with relevant numbers and information can help students "see" what is happening in the problem in a clear way. They should *always* draw a diagram when geometric figures are involved.

**Walk you through the material.** The best way to know for sure if your children “get” it is to have them teach you what they’ve learned. The process of explaining and working through each step of the problem is how they can figure out which points they may be unsure of, as well as those that they have mastered.

**Show work by recording each part of the problem step-by-step.** Remind your kids that even if they can do the work in their heads, writing it down will help prevent avoidable mistakes and execution errors. For this reason, many teachers require that students show every step of how they reached a solution rather than just recording the answer. If all that is written is the wrong answer, there’s no record of the child’s thought process. Moreover, if children make the same errors again and again, recording their work will allow the teacher to identify the precise area that needs support.

**Write neatly and organize information clearly.** All work should be done with pencils to facilitate easy erasing, and it’s important both to label which problem you are working on and begin a new line of math with enough room to complete it. Smushed numbers often end up being misread both by kids and their teachers. Graph paper — if it’s around or can be printed — can be particularly helpful for those who struggle to keep work visually organized.

**Slow down.** Students often mistake speed for skill. Unfortunately, kids who race through their work are far more likely to make errors than those who take their time. Rushing leads to mistakes ranging from misreading directions, to computational errors, to skipping problems altogether. Suggest that your child decide how much time is reasonable for a certain assignment, maybe 15 or 20 minutes, and set a timer to work for that entire period, so that finishing quickly isn’t the end game.

**Check work over.** Students should take the responsibility to check their own work over. But if they ask you for help, or you notice that they have made mistakes, don’t immediately tell them what they have done wrong. Instead, ask: “Can you find a mistake that you can correct?” It’s important that children develop the ability to identify and then fix their own errors.

**Be proactive about seeking out a teacher’s help.** Students’ ability to advocate for themselves has always been crucial, but never more so than now, when online learning platforms make it more challenging for teachers to gauge and address individual needs. Many students are reluctant to reach out for extra help, so remind your children not only that doing so helps them with content, but also that teachers view questions as a sign of their students being invested in the learning process.

**Suggest that children tackle math work first if they think it will be the hardest.** Students should complete the most difficult assignments earlier in the day when they have the most energy and potential to focus.

Most of all, in these trying times, try not to allow your desire to help turn into exasperation. Keep encouraging your kids to talk through their thinking. In math, as in life, parents should model the importance of asking questions and using what we do know in our approach to solving problems.

*Abby Freireich and Brian Platzer are the authors of the forthcoming book “Taking the Stress Out of Homework” and the founders of Teachers Who Tutor | NYC.*