

How parents can raise children who love maths

Issued by [Coronation](#)

3 Oct 2017

Parents can help their children develop key mathematical skills by playing simple games with them, and by maintaining enthusiasm for the subject.

“From our experience in Foundation Phase Mathematics education, we have come to appreciate parents' crucial role in putting children on the right track,” says Wendy Bergsteedt, head of marketing at Coronation Fund Managers.

Coronation has been involved for a number of years in supporting hundreds of foundation phase teachers in impoverished communities to strengthen their maths knowledge and implement practical teaching strategies. Over the past year, more than 8,000 children have benefited from the Counting with Coronation project, which is managed and implemented by the Primary Science Programme (PSP).

Teachers participate in a training programme, developed by PSP, over a cycle of two years. Experienced PSP facilitators also visit schools to help coach and mentor teachers in their classrooms to improve teaching and learning.

“The project focuses on primary school teachers, as early intervention will put children on a firm trajectory for the rest of their school careers,” says Bergsteedt. Learning maths is an incremental process: you can only build on your existing maths knowledge. Children who fall behind in primary school are left with huge gaps in their maths foundation, leaving them unable to catch up in high school.

“Parents' support at home complements and strengthens learning at school. Parents can improve a child's confidence and develop their maths skills by introducing concepts into daily routines and fun activities,” says Dr Zorina Dharsey, Director of PSP. A skilled teacher will build on the excitement and curiosity initiated in the home.

Academic research shows that simple parental interventions like playing dominoes with a young child, or encouraging older children to work out fractions as part of household chores, can deepen maths understanding.

Here are some ideas to get started:

- Show your child how numbers and counting apply to everyday life. Involve them in counting activities, e.g. measuring and counting the number of cups or spoonsful needed for a recipe. Talk about how things or amounts are more, less, bigger and smaller, and be sure to praise and encourage.
- Collect a variety of materials such old keys, plastic bottle caps, jelly beans in a bag, and buttons in jars for hands-on counting. Every day, encourage your children to count and re-count these items. For added fun, offer guesses at the total number of items and see who comes the closest.
- Use food (like dried pasta) or items from around the house to experiment with addition, subtraction and “more” and “less” activities.
- Read, tell stories, sing songs, and recite poems that include numbers and counting.
- Set your child simple daily challenges, like asking them to calculate the daily shop, or counting out utensils.

“The most important message to give children is that maths is fun,” says Dharsey.

Parents who are enthusiastic about maths help their children feel more confident and positive about learning key concepts. But all too often, parents express reservations about their own ability to do maths, and their anxiety rubs off on their children. At least one study shows that parents who believe being good at maths involves hard work and not innate ability, correlates with better achievements in maths.

“Be careful about how you speak about maths - in particular, avoid negative comments about your own ability and interest in the subject,” says Dharsey.

Parents can also strengthen their young children's literacy skills, and by extension their ability to develop numeracy skills, by reading to them before bedtime. “Similarly, committing to doing a sum a day with your child can have a lifelong impact,” concludes Bergsteedt.

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