

What to Do When Children Don't Want to Do Math

Engaging young children in playful math activities at home and school can build math skills and positive math attitudes. But children are not always eager to engage in math activities, even playful activities. There are many reasons why children express total disinterest and getting them involved can feel like a daunting task. **This resource is for anyone who has encountered resistance around early math learning and wondered what to do about it.**

Ideas for Maximizing Math Enjoyment

Perhaps the most important guidance is to avoid the kinds of conflicts that can turn children off to learning math altogether. Math is important, but it doesn't have to be done at any particular time or even on any particular day. In fact, learning interactions that turn into arguments and power struggles can do more harm than good.

Here are a few general suggestions for engaging children around math:

- It is not a good time to propose a math activity when a child is tired, getting easily frustrated, or upset.
- Young children want autonomy, so offer choices rather than directives about which activity to do or how to do it: "Do you want to play one of these card games or Chutes & Ladders? Would you like to count paper clips or buttons?"
- Show your own interest in the activity: "I played this when I was your age; it's really fun."
- Make it a game: "I bet you can't find any triangles in the kitchen. Let's see how many rectangles we can find."
- Provide a reason for why you want to do math: "Let's count out how many raisins go on each bowl of oatmeal, so we make sure everyone has the same. How many raisins should everyone get, 5 or 10?"
- Follow the child's interests and find math in the activities that the child enjoys. If, for example, your child doesn't enjoy cooking, but does enjoy games, focus your math learning time together on games.

Things to Avoid When Children Refuse to Do Math Activities

- Bribes. If you offer a reward for engaging in an activity, you are signaling to children that the activity isn't fun or worth doing on its own.
- Threats. They take the fun out of anything.
- Pointing out mistakes. If a child is struggling or comes up with a wrong answer, ask them to try again: "Try counting the bears again and see if you get a different number." It is also fine to ignore mistakes.

There are many different math activities and ways to engage children in math learning. Follow the child's lead and be creative and flexible to make the most of math time together.