

Maths Anxiety

Helping my child to have a ‘can do’ attitude

Whilst some learners may have negative feelings about other subjects in the curriculum, it is quite widely recognised that many learners may have a particularly negative attitude towards maths which could impact on their progress in school and possibly later in life. Quite often maths is seen as a subject where there are right and wrong answers with no middle ground and it is the fear of failure – of continuing failure- that may lead to anxiety.

Learners need to develop resilience in learning and accept that engaging in maths activities will require them to be persistent and to struggle at times. Making mistakes and finding things hard can lead to new learning.

Where pupils have not be supported with their struggle and have experienced continuing failure they may start to believe that they cannot do maths and give up before even trying new problems. Over time, learners will avoid challenges for fear of being wrong or of humiliation. Learners should be allowed to make mistakes as we learn more when we make mistakes. Sometimes adults are quick to step in to help children avoid making mistakes but they should be allowed to make them to find out how to use them to improve learning and how to move on and not be put off by their error.

Celebrating only correct answers compounds the feeling that learners are only successful if they get an answer right. Help your child to feel more positive about maths by celebrating other qualities. There is a myth that the best mathematicians are always:

- The fastest at recalling facts
- Always get answers right (maybe they are in their comfort zone and are not feeling challenged)

However, often it is these behaviours that received the most praise. If you look at the most successful mathematicians through time, they demonstrated many more qualities that made them successful in their work. These mathematicians worked for a lifetime on their ‘tricky problem’ before they found the answer! We can help children to change their attitude towards themselves as mathematics if we begin to celebrate other qualities. A good mathematician:

- has a love for, and an interest in, mathematics
- enjoys finding patterns and sees connections.
- sees maths everywhere



- is curious... *What if?.... How does this work? Why does this work?*
- gets stuck but tries different approaches
- takes risks
- asks questions
- has strategies to check their solutions
- is patient and persistent - particularly when an answer is hard to find
- can communicate clearly what they have done
- is not afraid of making mistakes
- accepts that learning maths is hard

What can I do at home?

- When your child is tackling a maths problem, praise their effort, the strategies they use and their positive behaviours rather than noting fast or accurate responses.

“Well done for taking a risk with that strategy. I know it didn’t get you to the answer you wanted but you may need to try a couple of ways before you find the best way”

“I know you weren’t happy making that mistake but it helped you to find a good strategy in the end”

“You showed you were a good mathematician today because you really persevered and tried lots of different ways”

- Try to avoid using words like ‘clever’ or praising levels of intelligence but celebrate effort. For example, avoid saying “that’s a good score, you must be really clever” and instead say “that’s a good score, you must have tried really hard”. Remember, there is no ‘maths gene’, everybody can succeed at maths if they are shown the right ways and are helped to develop the right attitudes.
- If your child says they can’t do something, remind them that they can’t do it **yet**. At some point they will learn the maths they need to solve the problem. This helps them to understand that although they may be struggling now, it is not hopeless, there will be a point when they understand it.
- Be aware of your own attitudes and feelings towards mathematics and try not to pass any of your anxieties onto your children. Try not to say “I wasn’t very good at maths” or “I don’t like maths” as this may further confirm your child’s own anxieties.
- Use the ‘I am a good mathematician because...’ poster to help your child identify what skills and qualities they demonstrated each day in their maths tasks.

Learners of all ages may struggle with maths and demonstrate negative attitudes. These ideas and resources can be taken and altered to suit the needs of your child whatever their age.