

Not everyone is a math person.

Math anxiety can start early on, affecting students in the primary grades just as much as they do those in high school. If students are taught coping skills while they are still learning those basic addition facts, they can internalize them and use them even when they are constructing a proof in geometry.

There are ways that teachers can promote a healthy math relationship.

When I think about the years that I taught preschool and kindergarten, one thing that sticks out in my mind is that the students seemed relatively fearless when it came to math. In fact they were downright excited to be doing math. Why? Because it was fun. Math is more than worksheets and drills. Math is applicative. Yes, they need those worksheets and drills to help them commit facts to memory so that application can become systematic, but there needs to be a fair balance of memorization with actual real-life possibilities.

It's fun to solve a problem. More than that, it's satisfying to solve a problem. And it builds esteem.

Mother's Day happens towards the end of the school year when we as teachers are starting to wear thin with not only our patience, but also our ideas. When I taught first grade in a public school in Tulsa, the students in my class helped to plan a Mothers' Day Tea for their mothers (grandmothers, aunts, etc.) The snacks for the tea became fraction practice. The napkins, plates, silverware became part of the budget plan. Those facts that we learned during math lessons became applied skills. They were doing math and they were having fun.

Projects are great formative assessments and offer "highlights" in student knowledge base, and while they do take the sting out of the number nerves, there are other ways to help quell those nerves.

One advantage that Math People have is that they have a way of "seeing" math. They can picture it in their heads. They can look at a problem and "see" the writing on the wall. So that's what I do. I stick it on a wall...as in a Word Wall. I use colorful paper to dissect the parts of number sentences or create fun arrays. Every part or example is labeled for those struggling or nervous students to use as a reference. Another nice thing about the math word wall? I can grow the wall and refer to it whenever I discuss new or not-so-new terminology. Word walls become an extension of the lesson and, more importantly, the learning. And the really stellar part about these? They can be used across the math continuum from pre-K to senior year.

Math anxiety really hits when the students have to take a timed test. We practice. And practice. And practice... The more they practice, the more confident they feel about their abilities. I start with ample time and practice taking the test. During the practices, I allow students to finish after time is called. Practices are just that and I want them to have a chance to show me what they do know. Another way that I help to build confidence and, hopefully, alleviate anxiety is by changing the timed tests from count downs to races. By using a stopwatch, I can challenge my students to beat their class time. They love trying to beat themselves. The key is in the fun.

When the math focus is beyond worksheets and drills, students' anxiety can begin to decrease. Taking a new approach to math through real world application lets students use those skills in a non-threatening, low-anxiety way. Even if they're not a math person.

