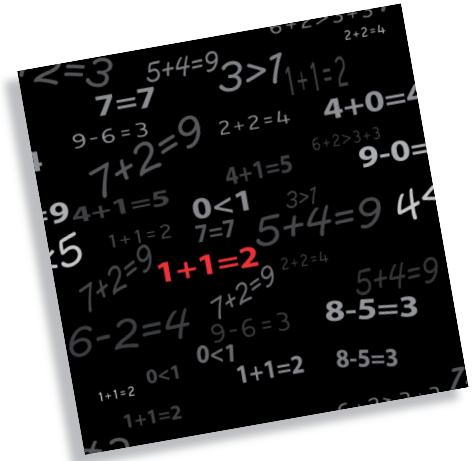


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# Overcoming Mathematics Phobia



Of all the subjects taught at school, the one most people are afraid of is maths. Maths answers are either right or wrong, and this makes many students nervous. Many adults are still “maths phobic” long after leaving school. At Education First we tutor more students in maths than any other subject – we often have to very skillfully help students overcome their maths phobia.

While some students love the challenge of learning something new, many are fearful of anything that might make them feel incompetent. They lack confidence – the belief that they can do the task in front of them, or if unsure, at least a feeling of hopefulness or boldness when trying it. A lack of confidence is then a belief that they will not be able to do the task, or a feeling of hopelessness or even fear.

How does this lack of confidence develop? I am sure all readers can recall a time when they first declined an invitation to take part in a certain activity such as dancing, swimming, drawing or singing. If you could identify your feelings at that moment, you would have possibly felt relief that you were not forced into it, that you were not compelled to perform in front of others at a level of expertise that was not up to your usual standards.

But school students are often given no choice to opt in or out – many school subjects are compulsory (including maths up to Year 10). School teachers spend their day asking students to leave their

comfort zone. When maths teachers say “Today we are learning something new”, we know many in the class will become uncomfortable. Their anxiety will prevent them from learning so by the end of the lesson, their belief that they are no good at learning maths will have been reinforced. Good teachers are aware of this, and use teaching techniques that provide the equivalent of training wheels or scaffolding, as they gently assist the students to leave their comfort zone.

I once worked with a Year 4 student named Lisa who was outstanding in English, but disliked maths, especially division. She would still attempt any maths put in front of her, provided she was first reassured that “it is not division”. She knew that she was not as good at maths as she was at English, and that she was not as good at division as she was with other maths skills. She did not like the feelings of incompetence that division produced. I had to be very gentle in taking her back to the very earliest concepts in division, relating division to other concepts she understood, and gradually leading her through to the level required for her age. She needed constant reassurance and encouragement that she was improving, that it would not be long until she was on top of it. Once she was able to “do division” her phobia had been overcome. I can report, some years later, that Lisa is studying advanced maths in high school and is doing very

well. She now uses her experience in overcoming “division phobia” to help her persist with any new topic that is difficult.

Good teachers and parents, can help students to develop the key attributes of successful students. Successful students are:

- not afraid of making mistakes when learning something new
- happy to ask questions when unsure about something
- not embarrassed to go back to the easiest part of the topic
- willing to do extra work if the class is moving too fast for them

By the way, parents are role models for their children, and need to avoid saying things like “I’m no good at maths.” If your children ask whether you were good at maths at school, answer honestly but include “I think I could have done better if I had been more positive about it.” While maths is easier for some people than others, persistence, patience and a positive attitude can help everyone to become as good at maths as they can be.

It may be wise to seek expert help if you think your child is developing maths phobia.

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