Things to Do While You're Waiting: Math

It's happening again! You're running errands with your children and suddenly you're stuck—in traffic, at the clinic, in the checkout line. Many parents find that playful learning activities can help reduce children's impatience when they have to wait.

You can use waiting time to show your child that Math = Part of Life.

Math is much more than just counting, adding, and subtracting! Playing with math concepts helps children become confident mathematical thinkers. Here are some quick math questions, games, and activities to engage a child who has to wait.

Counting

Use objects to help your child learn that each item we count corresponds to a number. "Let's put one can of beans on top of each cereal box." Ask each other questions like "How many trucks do you see?" "How many people are ahead of us in line, and how many will there be once the front person leaves?" Children also like action rhymes that involve counting.

Sequences and patterns

Order is important in math. Notice sequences with your child: "Looks like we're the second in line!" Find simple patterns together—the colors of floor tiles or the rhythms of people walking. Invite your child to make visual patterns using small objects around you.

Classifying

This means sorting things according to different properties. Make a game of sorting objects with your child, such as coins or laundry. Or you might suggest, "Let's find all the people with hats" or "I'll spot red cars and you spot cars in your favorite color."

Spatial relations

This has to do with shapes and locations of objects. You can "hunt" for shapes together: squares, triangles, rectangles, and circles. Use words like "on,""under," and "inside" to describe where you see the shapes. Drawing shapes in the air can also be fun.

Estimation and predictions

Children often like to make educated guesses. "Will our laundry fit in two washers?" "Which is higher, a stack of five pennies or five dimes?" "How can you tell?" Make a guess first, and then check to see how close your guess came.

Measurement and time

Investigate measurement together. "How many hands tall is this jar?" "Which is heavier, your coat or your boot?" "How many steps to the car?" Your child may like timing games: "How many times can you count to 10 before we are first in line?" "How long can you stand on one leg?"

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.

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