

Host a Family Math Night in Your School

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Mathematics education has changed dramatically over the last dozen years. What, how, and why we teach mathematics is now very different than many adults can recall in their own experience. Yet it is essential for parents and guardians to be partners and supporters in math teaching and learning.

The Family Math Program, developed in the 1980s at the Lawrence Hall of Science at the University of California at Berkeley, is a key program used by many schools to reach out to parents and families around mathematics education. It began a movement of parent/teacher led events to inform parents and guardians about current teaching of mathematics in K–8 classrooms, and the role that knowledgeable parents can play in supporting the mathematics learning of their students. The Family Math program acknowledged what we all know: families play a key role in helping children learn mathematics. We must reach out to parents and families to make this happen!

The most successful Family Math nights in schools are those designed and led by the parents and teachers of that school. Over the years, the pressures on teachers have grown, and one of the things that has fallen by the wayside is that many teachers that used to host Family Math nights for their schools, no longer do so. Yet the need for such programs is even more important today than before. Parents can assume some of the leadership in this role and stage successful Family Math events. This three-part article is designed to make it possible for this wonderful family outreach opportunity to happen in your community.

Please note that it is not my intention to reinvent the Family Math program. There is an absolutely wonderful set of published books called *Family Math*—you can find them online and in many bookstores. The information I include in these three articles is a tiny amount compared to the huge amount of information on hosting a Family Math night found in any of the *Family Math* books. My articles are a way of encouraging more Family Math events. If you are convinced you want to hold your own Family Math night, check out one of the books—you will not regret it.

Any Family Math night can, and probably should, have several goals. For example, you may think you just want families to come together and have a great time doing mathematics. That is a great goal, but since you gather parents together over mathematics so infrequently, you should make the most of this brief time and have at least two goals for the evening. Here are some additional possible goals of a Family Math event:

- Inform parents about the key mathematics standards at their student's grade level.
- Explain to families the important role they play in their student's study of mathematics.
- Show parents and guardians ways they can support mathematics learning at home.
- Show family members how to work side by side doing mathematics without pain and suffering.
- Help parents see how and why mathematics teaching has changed since they were in school.
- Demonstrate to parents that using objects, or hands-on learning, in mathematics teaching is a good thing.
- Impress upon adults and children the importance of perseverance in solving hard problems.
- Help parents understand how absolutely critical mathematics is to their student's success in elementary school, middle school, high school, college, and throughout life.

There is also a danger in having too many goals for your Family Math night. If you are going to make a point regarding any goal in the short period of time a Family Math night affords, it is best to choose two, or at most, three goals for the evening. Choose the goals that are currently most critical at your school. This is best done by a small team of parents and teachers discussing what they would like their school's Family Math night to achieve. Write the goals in large print on a piece of poster paper and, at every planning meeting for your Family Math night, post it in clear view while you plan the details of your event. It is easy to lose sight of the goals of your Family Math night.

Once you are clear on the goals of your Family Math night, it is then best to lock in the date on your school calendar as soon as possible since schools', teachers', and families' calendars get crowded very quickly. In your quest for a good date, first consider the time of the year your school would benefit most from such an event and best accomplish your goals. Just as important, choose a time of the year when both teachers and families will most likely be able to attend the event.

- **Fall** is a good time to host a Family Math night if you want to get the support of parents for the entire school year. Fall is difficult for planning because you either have to plan the event before school starts, or hit the ground running soon after the first day of school.
- **Winter** is a good time to host a Family Math night if you want to find the time of the year when the least is going on at your school and in the busy lives of families. For many, including schools and teachers, January and February are “fresh start” months. For families, most children’s sports have not started in earnest and the weather is best for inside activities. Winter is difficult for planning because you pretty much have to start planning in November and December, or move very quickly after coming back from winter break.
- **Spring** is a good time to host a Family Math night because the pressure of testing is usually over by early May and everyone is breathing a sigh of relief. A spring Family Math night is a nice way to invite your school community to join together to celebrate a successful year. Spring may be difficult for a Family Math night because it is sometimes hard to get families to attend when the weather turns sunny and warm outside, and sports teams are in full swing.

If you believe a Family Math night would benefit your school, make a commitment to do it this year—it is never too late to make it happen at your school. Form a team of parents and teachers willing to take on the planning of your Family Math night—but not necessarily all the work. A few parents and teachers who get along well and enjoy each other’s company can actually have a good time planning such an event (bring cookies).

If you are a principal, this is a great role for emerging parent and teacher leaders. Give them some resources, some planning time, and some autonomy. Let them come together and decide the goals of your Family Math night and help them

find the best date. Then support them all the way.

Get the event scheduled on your school and community calendars as soon as possible. Have the planning team, along with the administration, brainstorm all possible conflicting dates and events, both at school and in the community, before settling on a date for your Family Math night. You will never find an ideal date, but when you find the date with the fewest conflicts, set the date, put it on the school calendar, and announce it early to the community. This will do two things: it will possibly help your community avoid scheduling conflicting events, and it will solidify your commitment to host a Family Math night for your school.

In the next article, I will detail the many ways to organize a Family Math night. I am happy to answer questions or give advice, especially if you have committed to hosting a Family Math night at your school this year. You may contact me via e-mail at pgiganti@berkeley.edu. 

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