

How to Organize a Family Math Event: Questions to Ask Yourself

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In my first article on this topic, I talked about **why** your school should host a Family Math event, **what** the goal(s) of your Family Math event might be, and **when** the best times in the year are to host a Family Math event. In this second installment, I will discuss the details and planning needed in order to make your Family Math event a success. Since there are many ways to organize a Family Math event, your planning committee can begin the process leading to a successful Family Math event by asking the following questions.

Who do you want to attend?

The answer might at first be “families,” but the question requires a more specific answer. Considering the goal(s) you have chosen for your Family Math event (see Part 1), you can further define your target audience. For example, you might target young mothers and their children who are free during the day when their older children are in school. You might target fathers to encourage them to plan for their daughters to go to college. Or you could welcome the greater community surrounding your school—retired people, merchants, families with and without children—to attend. There are many other possible audiences for your Family Math event. Keep your goal(s) uppermost in your mind, then have your committee discuss and select your intended participants. Only then can you decide how best to attract them.

What is the best day and time?

The timing of your event is a big factor in attracting your chosen audience. For example, if you specifically want mothers to attend, you might hold your Family Math event during the morning, perhaps right after their children are dropped off for school. Many mothers will already be there and, with a few enticements such as coffee and baked goods, may stay and participate in your event. If you want fathers to attend, it is important to avoid the daytime hours for your event; working fathers are often only able to attend at night. Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights are usually the best for them. If you want a broader community to attend your event, consider making your Family Math event into a Family Math Fair and holding it on a Saturday.

For evening Family Math events, it is generally best to have a starting time after family dinner time and an ending time before children’s bedtime. Successful Family Math events have also been held after school and before dinner time, especially in areas that might be less safe at night. If you plan your Family Math event as a “drop in” event, where families can come and go at different times, you will give families maximum flexibility and encourage attendance—but remember, this flexibility means you may not be able to address all your families with an important message. With these factors in mind, the best times for a Family Math event are often 4:00–5:30, or 6:00–7:30 on weekdays, and 9:30 to noon on a Saturday. However, keep your own community in mind when you choose the times, since each community is different. You know your community the best.

Where is the best place to hold the event?

You can hold your Family Math event in your school’s multi-use room/cafeteria, gymnasium, or in multiple classrooms throughout the school. Your multi-use room and gym are natural choices since they offer the maximum amount of open space in most schools and usually have tables readily available for the mathematics activities. If you want the whole group to hear a speaker or a message of importance, these facilities are the best choice. Gyms offer the most space, but also tend to be the least warm and welcoming. Decorating a space especially for the event, however, presents a more festive and friendly atmosphere. In order to show off your school and its many different projects, you might choose to use several classrooms for your Family Math event. Keep in mind that if you do use multiple classrooms, you might find that your event is a harder to organize and orchestrate and will require a tighter schedule.

There have even been highly successful and fun Family Math events outdoors! If you are thinking about an outdoor Family Math event, be sure to plan it for a time of year with the least chance of bad weather. Take time to carefully plan the choice of outside activities—it isn’t much fun to chase papers blow off the tables! Once again, in choosing your location, consider your goal(s) and your

audience first.

How do you encourage families to attend?

Let's face it, mathematics is not always the largest draw for a school event! However, if you can get people in the door, you will find that interesting, engaging, and fun activities will overcome their reticence. But getting them in the door requires that you do some planning. First make sure you've chosen a date with the fewest conflicts in your school and community (see Part 1.) Then begin to advertise the event as soon as the date is set. Use school newsletters, flyers sent home with students, e-trees or phone trees, community bulletin boards, and community announcements in local newspapers. Of course, one of the best advertisements is an excited student. If you include students in the planning, you will not only have their support, they will also carry the word home.

If you plan to include food in your Family Math event, you can attract more participants. There can be simple refreshments or a full meal before the event—a meal makes the time a social as well as educational event. If you offer only refreshments, be careful to make sure that the food does not detract from the mathematics activities. Sticky materials are not fun!

You might also hold small raffles, student contests during the event, or offer homework vouchers for student attendance. Be creative in the ways you promote the event and make sure you advertise it as a fun experience for all.

How do we pay for the event?

How you pay for your Family Math event often takes as much forethought as planning the event itself. A Family Math event can be done on a shoestring budget, but if you want to have food, a raffle, or need materials to create your mathematics stations, you will need to fund your Family Math event far ahead of time. For small budgets, your school's site council and Parent/Teacher Organization are likely groups to approach for funding. Keep in mind the funding cycles of these organizations since they often set their budget for the entire year. September or October is often the best time to approach them, and when you do, have your goal(s), your audience, your plan, and your proposed budget ready. Schools that have Title One funding and/or school improvement funding have part of those funds earmarked specifically for parent and community outreach, so a Family Math event is a natural use for this funding. Remember, families that are interested, enthused, and involved

in mathematics can help raise test scores! Other local organizations or businesses may also be willing to help fund a Family Math event. Think creatively for ways to fund your Family Math event as well. You might find several different resources that will each provide a part of the funding or food. But get the funding in place early, so that you can confirm your budget.

In Part 3 of *How to Host a Family Math Event*, I will talk about the many possible activities to include at your Family Math event. Since this column will not appear until June 2008, that might be too late if you are planning a Family Math event this year. I am happy to answer questions or give advice, especially if you have just committed to hosting a Family Math night this year. You can contact me through my e-mail address listed at the beginning of this article. 📧

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