

Why You Should Volunteer in Your Child's Classroom

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For some parents, the thought of volunteering in your child's classroom can be frightening; volunteering to help with mathematics in your child's classroom can be twice as scary. Perhaps you may think: "I don't like math; how could I help?" Or: "I was never good at math; I'm afraid the teacher will find out." Or maybe even: "It's been so long; the math seems so different now; I don't think I could help." However, volunteering to help the teacher with mathematics in your child's classroom has many more benefits than trials and tribulations. Here are a few reasons why you should volunteer to be a math helper.

1. Volunteering in the classroom sends a powerful message to your child.

When your children see you coming to their classroom to help, especially with mathematics, it sends a silent but powerful message: "My mother or father thinks mathematics is important enough to give her/his time!" Without saying a word, the child also hears and understands, "If my Mom or Dad can do math, then so can I!" While this is true about helping with all subjects, because mathematics can be hard for some students, the example you share with your child by volunteering can be especially important.

2. Working with students other than your own child is illuminating.

Often, helping your children with math homework is the only experience parents get. Yet, as most parents have learned, that can often be an unpleasant mathematical experience. However, helping a teacher in class during math time is often more productive and much more enjoyable. When you volunteer in your child's classroom, it is unlikely you will be working with only your own child. In fact, nine times out of ten, you will be helping children other than your own.

This can have two advantages. First, it may be just as hard to work with your own child in the classroom as it is at home helping with homework. While your child will be very proud that you have taken the time to volunteer in class, he/she still may prefer not to work with you (the older your child, the more this tends to be true). Second, working with children other than your own in a classroom can teach you a lot about how children learn and how to explain the same idea in different ways, and can illuminate the strengths and limitations of your own child. As a bonus, working with other students gives you a fresh start; the other students do not know you so they have no reason not to love you!

3. Not only do teachers need assistance; children need to be exposed to other adults as part of the learning process.

While there are a few teachers who do not like parents helping in their classroom, the majority would appreciate the help because they know their students benefit by having another adult in the classroom. Every parent who works in a child's classroom is, in effect, an adult role model for children. When you are kind and helpful, students learn lessons about being kind and helpful themselves. Two or more adults in a classroom doubles the opportunity for students to see an adult in positive situations. In my own classroom experience not every student understood MY explanation of a concept—a parent volunteer sometimes used different words or a different approach that worked better for some students. Parents helping in a classroom make a big difference. *A bit of advice here: let the teacher know that you would like to work directly with students. Teachers often need help grading papers, but almost everything that is valuable about working in the classroom will not happen if you only sit in a corner grading papers!*

4. Discover first-hand what and how mathematics is taught to your child.

In general, teachers will tell you where they could use the most assistance, and it may not be in mathematics. However, if you mention that you are interested in helping with mathematics, many will jump at the chance since they know MANY parents do not want to help during math time. When you are a volunteer during math time, you also have an opportunity to see how the teacher teaches a certain concept or idea and learn new approaches to working with your child at home. If you work with several children to help them learn a new mathematics idea, you often have the opportunity to hone your explanation of that concept and experiment with different ways to reach different children. This too can be very helpful with your own children.

5. Learn a little mathematics yourself in the process of helping others.

If you do not think you know enough mathematics to help children, you are probably wrong. First of all, teachers will give tasks to parent volunteers that they are sure they can handle. Second, teachers explain clearly to parents what their task will be and how best to work with the students. You can learn on the spot, and you can learn a little mathematics at the same time you are helping children learn. Volunteering at math time is a wonderful opportunity to become more comfortable with mathematics yourself because, chances are, you will be teaching a concept you know well to children learning it for the first time. No, you will not learn Calculus this way, but you probably won't be volunteering in a Calculus class!

6. Gain valuable insights about your child, the teacher, and ways your child can succeed and prosper in his or her classroom.

When you are working in a classroom, you will notice how the teacher operates—how he or she talks, acts, works with children, and much more. You will also notice how different children speak, act, learn, and are motivated. And even when you are not working with your own child, you will notice how your child works in a classroom situation. Though you

are there to help and not to spy, you cannot help but notice all these things while you are helping—and all your observations can tell you a great deal about learning and your child, and how you might be more effective working with your children. A child's learning is an everyday miracle, but there are ingredients you can discover by being inside the learning environment that is every classroom.

It may seem that volunteering in the classroom is just one more thing you do not have time for. But by spending just one hour a week in your child's classroom, you can gain valuable insights into helping your own child do well in mathematics. It is good for your child, good for the rest of the students, good for your child's teacher, and it will be good for you to since you will learn more ways to work with your child at home! 

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