

# 'Math anxiety' is a real thing. Here are three ways to help your child cope

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From March 15, [more than 1 million](#) young Australians will sit the NAPLAN numeracy test. For most students, this will just be a routine part of the school day (albeit less fun than running around at recess or

lunch).

But for others, the prospect of doing a math test will be downright terrifying. These students may be suffering from math [anxiety](#).

We are academics in mathematics education. Here's how to help your child if they are experiencing math anxiety.

## What is math anxiety?

[Math anxiety](#) is the feeling of tension and worry that interferes with a person's ability to solve mathematical problems. Researchers consider math anxiety to be [distinct](#) from general anxiety, or test anxiety, though there is some crossover.

Math anxiety usually develops as a result of poor experiences with math, which leads to negative thought patterns about your math potential. These thoughts can manifest in an avoidance of math and feelings of helplessness when confronted with tests.

Math anxiety is a common issue for many [young people](#) and adults and can be seen in children as young as five.

According to Stanford University [mathematics education](#) professor [Jo Boaler](#), as of 2012, up to 50% of adults had math anxiety. The [Victorian Department of Education](#) suggests rates are lower, at between six and 17%. However, the average rate in academic studies tends to be [approximately 20%](#).

That means there are thousands of children who will be dreading the upcoming NAPLAN numeracy test.

So, what can a parent do to help their anxious child achieve their best in

the NAPLAN numeracy test and other math exams? Here are three practical things you can do right away and into the future:

## **1. Focus on successes to build confidence**

Most children want to be good at math. If they are younger, they will likely understand this is something their teachers and parents think is important. If they are older, they will know it is important for future jobs and careers.

One of the [key sources](#) of math anxiety is despite wanting to be good at math, students have received consistently [negative feedback](#) about their ability. This may just be by comparing themselves to others or more formally through poor results.

To reduce anxiety, it is important to focus on the positive, showing your child times where they have had success in math. Experiences of success are vital in [paving the way](#) to further success in math.

A practical way to demonstrate success is by getting the child to do an old worksheet, even as far back as two years ago. Students in years 5 and above could do a previous NAPLAN test at a lower level. This shows them how they have progressed.

After completing the sheet, focus on areas of strength—such as "you got all the long divisions correct!"—to help build confidence. This experience of success can be used as a base to then tackle more complicated tasks.

## **2. Avoid 'NAPLAN overload'**

Anxiety about NAPLAN and any other assessments can be exacerbated

by over-emphasizing its importance in the build up. A more constructive approach is to reassure your child there is no judgment in how they perform.

Currently, most schools are working hard to prepare students for NAPLAN and discussions about the test are regularly taking place. Because of this, it can be easy for children with math anxiety to get "NAPLAN overload." At home, it is useful to limit your discussion of the upcoming tests to times where the child is doing work to prepare for it.

We recommend trying to make the day an exciting one, rather than a terrifying one. For example, you might have a special NAPLAN breakfast on the day of the test.

### **3. Work alongside your child**

During COVID many families felt the strain taking a hands-on role with their children's education (who did not take kindly to mum or dad suddenly becoming their "teacher"). So parents may be tempted to leave their children alone to study or do homework. But this won't help relieve math anxiety.

A more beneficial approach is for parents to [study alongside younger children](#), and show interest in the work [older children](#) are completing. Teenagers may not be open to help when you offer the first time but make it clear that you're there if they need you and you aren't seeking to judge them.

This approach shows the child their parent is engaged with their work and positive about their ability to learn.

It cannot be underestimated how much a parents' approach to learning

math [influences](#) their child's approach. Try and have positive conversations with your child about math and how we use it everyday. This can help dispel negative attitudes, such as children thinking, "this is too hard and is just something I need to do at school." You might want to use [math](#) to work through a "best buy" at the supermarket or use length and area to determine how to arrange the furniture in a room.

As the test day nears, families should not have to stress out about NAPLAN. Preparation focused on celebrating successes and positive experiences can encourage students to simply do their best.

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