

Study: Preschool kids have math skills

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Harvard psychologists in Cambridge, Mass., say 5-year-olds are able to grasp numeric abstractions and arithmetic concepts even without formal education.

The discovery of such inborn skills among preschoolers could point the way to new teaching techniques, making arithmetic easier and more pleasant for elementary school children.

"Teaching symbolic arithmetic is one of the primary tasks of the first four years of elementary education," says co-author Elizabeth Spelke, a Harvard professor of psychology. "Some children have enormous trouble mastering this skill, and most children find symbolic arithmetic challenging and, at times, confusing.

"Our studies say, however, that children already have a basic understanding of this domain. I hope our work points the way to improving mathematics education by building on this understanding."

A paper describing the findings will be published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences and is now on the journal's Web site.

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