

Attitudes toward Math and Their Effects on Tutoring Sessions

Christina Jones

Kennesaw State University

I have been a math tutor at the university level for a year and a half and have always tried to help my friends who were struggling with math. Having dealt with numerous tutees, I have observed many different attitudes toward math and their effects on student success. While there are always tutees that love math and are excited to learn, this is not usually the case. Most tutees come to us because they are struggling and realize they are not where they need or want to be academically for a variety of reasons. Tutees share a wide range of emotions and attitudes toward math, most of which are negative. These negative emotions and attitudes toward math can set the tone for the whole tutoring session, and are often paired with a lack of motivation or confidence, but if a tutor can get a tutee to look at math in a positive, non-intimidating way, it can make a world of difference.

Some tutees do not see the relevance of the math class they are taking resulting in a serious lack motivation. They see the calculus class they are enrolled in as something they will never use again after they pass it. These are the tutees that know they need to pass the class, but are not going to be happy about putting the work in to do it. One reason for this may be that the tutee does not realize the real world applications of what they are learning. The challenge tutors face with these tutees is that the tutees do not want to do the required work. In extreme cases, tutees come into

Christina Jones is the Assistant Director at the Science and Math Academic Resources Tutoring Center (SMART) at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, Georgia. Contact: Christina.Jones@kennesaw.edu

a tutoring session and expect the tutor to do the work for them. This is a problem for two reasons: (1) it is cheating and the tutee does not understand what a tutor is meant to do and (2) the tutee is not interested in learning. In this situation, the tutor first has to explain the responsibilities of the tutor and hope the tutee wants to continue the session. Then, the tutor has to convince the tutee that what they are doing is worthwhile. If a tutor can convince the tutee that there is a worthwhile application of the math they are doing in class, it can motivate learning, but that is not always easy or possible. Many times all a tutor can do is stay positive and encourage the tutee to do the same.

Math is something that many tutees feel they are not good at, and people do not usually enjoy doing things they do not feel confident doing. Countless times, tutees come to a session and the first thing they say is, “me and math don’t get along,” or, “I hate math.” This often stems from a bad experience or a lack of basic knowledge. Once, while discussing her daughter’s progress in geometry, I spoke with a college educated woman who told me she *couldn’t* do geometry. She confessed that she had a horrible geometry teacher who she felt hated her and would refuse to answer her questions in class. She had never had any trouble in school until that point and she barely passed the class. She believed she passed because the teacher did not want her in his class the next semester. The tutee’s mother could find the volume of a rectangular prism, but the fact that she had that experience made her run when she heard the word geometry.

When a tutee comes in discouraged due to a bad experience or a lack of fundamental knowledge, the tutor’s job is not only to help the tutee understand the material, but also to help the tutee overcome his fear. The tutee feels incompetent, and even if the tutee knows how to do a problem, he may be too scared or discouraged to

even attempt the problem. Because of this the tutor often has to pry information out of the self-doubting tutee and this is often a painful process, but if it is done right, it can boost confidence which is the key. Tutees need to believe they can succeed, and a lack of confidence can be one of the most detrimental things for a tutee. If a tutee feels she cannot succeed, she loses the ability to self-motivate and become an independent learner, which, is really what a tutor is working toward.