

Searching for Gauss*

When we first began homeschooling our son, it seemed that the day would soon be in hand when he would look adoringly up at me, eyes glistening with tears, grateful that finally he had math he adored. Math came very easily to him from a very early age, and he was instantly frustrated in school. His school had some accommodations for reading for kids at different levels. In kindergarten my son would be led by some older kids to another room, where he'd read to his heart's content. When it came time for math, though, he had to sit quietly and count with all the other kindergartners.

It wasn't long before I put aside my delusions of gratitude. Math is one of those topics that I freak out over. We'd taken time off before beginning our homeschool journey, but even so, he refused to add or subtract. I tried multiplication and division, which he endured very briefly. While we experimented with unit studies I gave him his math translated into Egyptian symbols (man, the internet is a lovely thing) and voilà, a system that worked!

The stinker showed me. When he'd finished (quite happily, so really, it worked) he'd answered them all. In Egyptian. Nuts. I just didn't have the energy to do that all the time.

When he got tired of Egyptian math, we moved on to games. We tried Singapore. We mutually rejected Saxon and Math-U-See. We did EPGY math but since we'd used a tax refund to fund that experiment, and I could tell his interest was waning, we didn't sign up again when our time was up.

It bothered me that he refused to memorize his multiplication. "Relax," wiser homeschooling friends than I had said. "He'll figure it out when he's interested." I bought math supplements he seemed to enjoy, wrap-ups, and we made pizza and fractions. I let him teach his sister to count (man, that kid is a math nazi, he had fits when she skipped counting 15 because she didn't like it). Finally I got tired of his begging to out-math his older brother, and I bought Calculus for 7 Year Olds (yes, 7 Year Olds). I thought maybe that would do it, but nope, he looked at the first two pages and promptly lost interest.

If my kids can read and do math, I figure they have the basics for college. I seemed to be exhausting my options...

Next I discovered an online program called Riverdeep. Riverdeep is a program for school kids (but they had homeschool pricing) and basically it entails a cartoon robot teaching math using applied (albeit word) problems. AHA! This time things clicked for quite a while and I thought it was a perfect match. No longer did we have fights over finishing math. But even Riverdeep's number was up. It seems they don't have a rotating batch of problems, and ultimately he got tired of the same-old same-old and we moved on.

Then we tried one of "___ The Easy Way" (fill in the blank with your math, in our case Algebra). We did better with this at first too, there were characters and a story, and you solved problems at the end of chapters. This worked for about half of the book, or until he discovered that algebra, for most people, isn't something you can do easily in your head. We put it aside, did some sudoku and games, and the 'ole back to basics multiplication again.

Just recently I bought “Painless Geometry,” which though more of a regular textbooky type of thing, still has its moments. We’ve only done one chapter but there are tips and challenges, cartoons and a couple of jokes. So far, so good.

In the meantime we’re still searching for Gauss.

*Gauss was a mathematician famous for his curve, also known as the normal curve.