

The Conversation at Your Kitchen Table Matters More Than You Think

Guidance for home, from someone who graded the homework · Published June 17, 2026

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Let me tell you what I know after years of teaching math in public schools. I taught sixth grade. I taught eighth grade. I taught high school. Every single one of those buildings was a Title I school, funded that way because a high percentage of its students came from low income families. Mathwell believes in equity in education and wants to be a secret weapon in eradicating the disparity in math achievement scores, though everything I am about to share applies to all students across all socioeconomic backgrounds. And in every single one of those buildings I watched the same thing happen. A student would bomb a quiz, go home, and come back the next day carrying something heavier than a bad grade. They came back carrying a story about themselves.

That story usually got written at the kitchen table. Not because parents are doing anything wrong, but because nobody ever handed parents a script for this. So here is the honest truth about what helps and what hurts.

Your student does not need you to know the math. They need you to know them.

When homework gets tense, and it will, resist the urge to jump straight to fixing. I have sat across from hundreds of parents at conferences, and the most common thing I heard was some version of: I tell him to just try harder. Here is the problem. A student who is stuck does not have an effort problem. They have a confidence problem wearing an effort costume. Telling them to try harder when they genuinely do not know where to start just confirms their suspicion that something is wrong with them.

Instead, try this. Ask them to show you one thing they do understand about the problem. One thing. It sounds small. It is not. You just moved them from what they cannot do to what they can, and that is the entire game in mathematics.

Celebrate strategy, not speed. I watched fast kids get praised their whole lives until the math got hard enough that fast stopped working, and then they fell apart, because their entire identity was built on quick. The students who lasted were the ones whose families noticed things like: you tried it a second way when the first way did not work. That is the praise that builds a mathematician.

And one more thing, because I promised to be honest with you. If math homework regularly ends in tears, yours or theirs, that is not a discipline issue and it is not a laziness issue. It is a signal. Listen to it early. The students I worried about most were never the ones who struggled loudly. They were the ones who learned to struggle silently because home and school both got tense when math came up.

Small shifts in language at home can genuinely transform how a student experiences learning. I watched it happen from the front of the classroom for years. The kitchen table is more powerful than my whiteboard ever was.

Written by the founder of Mathwell, a former public school mathematics teacher across sixth grade, eighth grade, and high school, all in Title I schools. Mathwell · Purposeful Secondary Mathematics · Social Emotional Learning · getmathwell.com