

The Math Movement | Practices for Interacting with Students

In **The Math Movement** we make communication a point of emphasis when interacting with our kids. Our communication is focused on making clear the type of environment we are trying to create for our kids. We use words to communicate in many ways: by explicitly stating our standards of behavior in assemblies with all students and staff present; by discussing the reasoning behind our decision making in TA debriefings, senior staff dialogues, and meetings with students and parents; and by providing our written codes of conduct to staff.

We also communicate in many ways that do not involve words. A large share of communication is non-verbal (Mehrabian (2007), Pease and Pease (2002)), and we make a point of emphasis to communicate through means beyond words. The most important way we communicate in **The Math Movement** is by the example of our behavior. We emphasize the power of modeling behavior because we have found it to be the most effective form of communication. As James Baldwin once said, “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.” This emphasis elevates the everyday interactions we have with our students.

1 What Are We Communicating?

What are we trying to communicate to our kids about the type of environment we are trying to create? Recall that our learning community is built on a simple insight: You have incredible power when kids know you care about them. As a result, everything we do at our camp is built around caring for kids or communicating that love to the kids. When we say that we want to communicate that we care to our kids, that means we want to communicate:

1) This is a place where you are safe, physically and mentally.

Pain serves an important role in life, and we accept that it is necessary to experience pain. Pain and suffering can make us better people: [Aeschylus](#) declared that “Zeus, who guided mortals to be wise, has established his fixed law— wisdom comes alone through suffering.” (Aeschylus (1984)). Pain can keep us safe and healthy: The Dalai Lama has discussed this in terms of leprosy, in which extremities deteriorate not because they are attacked directly by the disease, but because those with the disease lose the ability to feel pain and therefore to avoid harming their limbs (Lama and Cutler (1998)). And we all know from personal experience with mental and physical training that pain is a necessary condition for growth and improvement.

Like all things in life, though, pain needs to be balanced. The case of leprosy illustrates that not enough pain can lead us to be unable to avoid harm. But we also know that too much pain –

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trauma – can lead us to be harmed. The long-term consequences of children experiencing trauma are simply bad (Felitti et al. (1998), Aliprantis (2017)).

We do not accept kids experiencing trauma, and we want to communicate this to our kids. We know that many of our kids are experiencing trauma, and establishing that we have created a safe place for our kids lets them experience a treatment for trauma: safety (Badenoch (2017)).

2) This is a place where we want to help you grow, but the choice is ultimately yours.

We want to help each student develop to their fullest capacity, but what does this mean? More precisely, what do we see as the aim of **The Math Movement** programs or of education more generally? We can start answering this question with [Albert Einstein's view](#), which was that “The aim [of education] must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals who, however, see in the service to the community their highest life achievement” (Einstein (2011)). We might also think of our goal as increasing our students' intrinsic motivation, where we think in terms of [self-determination theory](#) (Ryan and Deci (2000), Tough (2016)), which “is concerned with supporting our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways.” Self-determination theory argues that relative to extrinsically-motivated behavior, intrinsically-motivated behavior leads to higher performance, persistence, and creativity, as well as greater wellness. Self-determination theory posits that three ingredients are required for all people to engage in intrinsically-motivated behavior: *competence*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness*.

A focus on *competence* is what an outside observer might expect from **The Math Movement**. And this focus is indeed a part of **The Math Movement**: our students work hard to learn math.

The fact that **The Math Movement** places an even greater focus on *autonomy* and *relatedness* might surprise an outside observer. We see these two aspects of our programs as being absolutely fundamental. Consider *autonomy*: How satisfying would it be to turn our students into computers or robots who exhibited great competence in math but simply followed orders?! Similarly, it is hard for us to think about what it means for our students to grow without thinking about *relatedness*. Much like Einstein, we see service to the community as the greatest achievement in life.

The emphasis on both *autonomy* and *relatedness* is how **The Math Movement** achieves a beautiful balance between the individual and the communal. We see each other as a part of the same effort, with the defining feature that each individual has their own place in that effort that is essential to the entire effort. If each individual has an essential place, then we value each individual for who they are, and we see it as a priority to help each individual develop to their fullest capacity. But our programs serve only as invitations, as each student must make the choice for themselves to develop their contribution to life.

3) This is a place where we want to have fun and enjoy life.

4) This is a place where we support each other – for the long haul.

2 How Do We Communicate?

1) This is a place where you are safe, physically and mentally.

- a. We state explicitly and often that we do not accept any form of violence.

We stress in assemblies in front of all students and staff that we do not accept any violence in our programs, even in the form of “play.” We stress that even play can very quickly devolve into someone getting seriously hurt. We frame our conversation in terms of students making decisions that will keep them safe.

- b. We act to show that we do not accept any form of violence.

We have a zero-tolerance policy regarding violence, and we act on that policy. If a student engages in violence we will first acknowledge the behavior. Depending on the circumstances we will ask the student to sit out and reflect for a day, two days, or the rest of the summer camp. We will typically inform all students in an assembly that the reason some people are no longer with us is because they have engaged in violence.

We treat mental violence – bullying – the same way we treat physical violence.

- c. We create policies and practices designed to keep kids safe, and we explain the motivation for those policies to our kids.

One example of a policy designed to keep kids safe is that no student leaves a classroom and goes to the bathroom alone. We explain that we ask students to at least have a TA escort them to a restroom because we are on an open campus where we do not control who is let onto campus.

- d. We make sure students and staff know the chain of command.

We make sure all of our kids know that if they are not feeling safe, they can tell a senior staff member (TAs and older). The chain of command is TAs (high school mentor), CIs (College Instructors), Instructors, and Directors.

2.1) This is a place where we want to help you grow, ...

- a. We have high standards, and we will support you in reaching those standards.

We do not accept our students giving us less than their best, academically or socially. If a student’s behavior or performance is not up to our standards we first acknowledge that fact. We then enter into a dialogue with the student about what support is needed for them to reach our standards.

- b. We hire high school students as Teaching Assistants (TAs) to serve as near-peer mentors.

Students get individualized attention from a TA assigned to work with them throughout the summer camp. The ratio is typically 2 students (7th, 8th, or 9th graders) paired with 1 TA (10th, 11th, or 12th graders). One College Instructor (CI) leads a team of 10 students and 5 TAs, creating individualized lesson plans for their TAs to use with their students in response to their tracking of their students' progress through the curriculum.

- c. We acknowledge our students as individuals.

In every way possible we try to treat students as individuals. One way we do this is simply calling them by name. We emphasize name tags in classrooms during the first week of camp so that instructors can learn students' names. We also have team-leaders, CIs, announce their students' names in front of everyone, both in introductions during our first week, as well as when acknowledging performance.

- d. We celebrate individuality and elevate our kids whenever possible.

We post pictures of kids in our hallways and we encourage CIs to decorate their team rooms with a theme of their choice in which they celebrate their students.

- e. We acknowledge performance and effort.

Every morning when we hold assemblies attended by all students and staff we acknowledge students who are performing to our standards, both academically and socially. This will most often take the form of CIs reciting the names of their students who have scored 100% on their previous homework. But sometimes this will take the form of a CI pointing out someone's impressive effort or act of kindness. We also call home to let parents and guardians know when their kids are doing a great job, and not just when their kids are not meeting our standards.

2.2) ... but the choice is ultimately yours.

- a. Our goal is to help students make better decisions, not for us to make better decisions for them.

This philosophy applies across the board, whether we are talking about how to solve a math problem, what food to eat, or how to handle "discipline" in a given situation. Our program is not about telling kids what to do. We do have strong standards, though, and so we do not accept any behavior from our students. But within very broad boundaries of acceptable behavior, our aim is to improve decision making rather than to impose our will.

- b. We treat our students with the same respect we would grant to any other human being.

As an example, consider a student in class distracted by a cell phone. If such a scenario were playing out during a business meeting, we would never go up to another adult and simply take away their cell phone. We treat our students with the same respect, and so

we do not simply take away their phone. Instead, we acknowledge the behavior, note it is not up to our standards, and engage in a dialogue with the student about how they might be able to reach our standards in the future.

As another example, we do not have a dress code. We encourage kids to wear clothing as a means of self expression, as long as their choices stay within “good taste.”

As a final example, we might see our students buying junk food from a vending machine rather than eating the healthy breakfast we provide for them. We would encourage the students to choose the healthier options we have provided, but we would not force the students to make that choice.

- c. We treat “discipline” as something to be developed within our students rather than something we do to our students.

When a student engages in behavior that is not up to our high standards, we enter a dialogue with that student to understand what support they need to meet our standards.

To be clear: This does not mean that we accept any behavior! As an example, if a student were disrupting a class we would not simply allow that behavior to continue. Such behavior would not reflect the student’s best effort toward learning, and the behavior would also prevent other students in their class from learning. We would handle the situation as follows:

- If a student were interrupting class, the instructor would encourage the student to change their behavior.
- If the behavior continued, the instructor would ask the student to step out of class and to go see the Dean of Students. Depending on the class, the student would be escorted either by a TA or CI to the senior staff room, where they would wait (with an adult present) until the end of the class.
- At the end of class, the instructor would discuss the incident with the student and the Dean. The Dean would focused the discussion on the student addressing two questions:
 - i) What decisions did I make?
 - ii) Were there any better decisions I could have made?
- After this discussion the Dean might ask the student to sit out a day or a week to reflect on the incident. Depending on the student’s state of mind, as revealed in the discussion, the Dean might make the decision right there on the spot. The decision of how to respond to a student’s behavior will very often become the topic of a staff dialogue in which we try to examine the situation from all possible angles before making a decision.

It is important to note that while we hold our students to a high standard of behavior, we never react to a failure to reach our standard with anger or try to punish our students. We are on the same team, at all times, and we are trying to work together. Our approach is related to the methods of [Conscious Discipline](#) discussed in Bailey (2015).

- d. We try not to tell our students what to do, and instead give them choice whenever possible.

We constantly stress to our students that we are giving them choices. We point out that the only times we will curtail their choice is due to safety or logistics, not just because we like to tell them what to do.

In assemblies we will often make statements like “I’m not going to tell you to do X, Y, or Z, but you all know that engaging in A, B, or C is not what we are about here at TMM.”

- e. We tell students how powerful their choices can be and direct their attention to the great things that are possible but that depend on their choices.

We tell the students stories at many points. In particular, senior staff will share stories in assemblies to start the day, whether taken from the world or their own personal experiences.

3) This is a place where we want to have fun and enjoy life.

- a. We try to make camp fun for our kids in every way possible.

- b. We have a minister of humor and tell jokes every day.

In assemblies the minister of humor is responsible for putting a smile on kids’ faces. The role of the minister of humor is a bit like the role of a professional wrestler – you just want to get the crowd riled up. The minister of humor is very sure about how funny his or her jokes are, but they end up being very cheesy/corny and generally just bad. But the very corniness of the jokes is often what makes them funny!

- c. We “let loose” on Thursdays.

We take a quiz to end each week to measure our progress. Aside from this, we “let loose” after a week of hard work. Assemblies on Thursdays are about having fun: We have an extended joke – the joke of the week – that is a sketch performed by TAs and students and organized by the Minister of Humor. We sing and dance in assembly – we are happy to just get silly and have some fun. Lunches on Thursdays are also about having fun. Instead of our Discovery classes, on Thursdays we have an extended lunch – provided by [The Math Movement](#) – where all students and staff join together to hang out and have fun.

4) This is a place where we support each other – for the long haul.

- a. We encourage our kids to come back to camp summer after summer.

We make it a point of emphasis that we are building a community, and so we expect our kids to come back to camp. We encourage our students to recruit their friends and to envision themselves as future TAs. We encourage TAs to recruit their friends and to envision themselves as future CIs.

- b. We use hand signals to communicate support.

We use hand signals throughout our camp as a way of communicating without words. One reason this is helpful is that it allows many people to communicate at the same time without verbally interrupting each other. Most importantly, one of our hand signals allows us to communicate that we are supporting each other. Academically, this creates a type of home court advantage. Just as it is somehow easier to shoot a basketball when 10,000 people are cheering you on, solving math problems somehow becomes easier when your TA, CI, and Instructor are cheering you on. Socially, this is a way of expressing how much we care for each other. Moments will arise in camp when the simple gesture of showing that we support one another makes all the difference.

- c. We establish a team culture and elevate the way kids see each other.

There is a story in Zander and Zander (2002) about a group of monks who are expecting a prophet to join them at their monastery. A visiting monk tells them that the prophet is already among them. The monks react to each other differently afterwards, wondering if the person they are interacting with is the prophet. As a result, the monks treat each other well and look for the good in each other.

In every way possible, we try to encourage this same mindset with our kids.

- d. We end the week on a high note.

We tend to let loose on Thursdays, as described above. The same is true for staff. On Thursdays we do not have a senior staff dialogue. Instead, everyone just gets together and points out the cool things that happened that week. This is an incredibly important practice! TAs and CIs giving each other shout outs and opening up helps to create community. And more importantly, by acknowledging the beauty in each others' actions, we tend to look for that beauty everywhere. It also makes us tend to try to behave in beautiful ways ourselves. It is difficult to overstate the importance of this practice.

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