

Word Problem Tips

Parents often find it challenging to teach children how to solve word problems. Here are some suggestions for helping your student learn this important skill.

The first step is to realize that word problems require both reading and math comprehension. Don't expect a child to be able to solve a word problem if he does not thoroughly understand the math concepts involved. On the other hand, a student may have a math skill level that is stronger than his or her reading comprehension skills. Below are a number of strategies to improve comprehension skills in the context of story problems. You may decide which ones work best for you and your child.

Strategies for word problems

- 1) Ignore numbers at first and read the story. It may help some students to read the question aloud. Every word problem tells a story. Before deciding what math operation is required, let the student retell the story in his own words. Who is involved? Are they receiving gifts, losing something, or dividing a treat?
- 2) Relate the story to real life, perhaps by using names of family members. For some students, this makes the problem more interesting and relevant.
- 3) Build, draw, or act out the story. Use the blocks or actual objects when practical. Especially in the lower levels, you may require the student to use the blocks for word problems even when the facts have been learned. Don't be afraid to use a little drama as well. The purpose is to make it as real and meaningful as possible.
- 4) Look for the common language used in a particular kind of problem. Pay close attention to the word problems on the "Lesson Practice" pages, as they model different kinds of language that may be used for the new concept just studied. For example, "altogether" indicates addition. These "key words" can be useful clues, but should not be a substitute for understanding.
- 5) Look for practical applications that use the concept and ask questions in that context.
- 6) Have the student invent word problems to illustrate their number problems from the lesson.

Cautions

- 1) Unneeded information may be included in the problem. For example, we may be told that Suzie is 8 years old, but the 8 is irrelevant when adding up the number of gifts she received.
- 2) Some problems may require more than one step to solve. Model these questions carefully.
- 3) There may be more than one way to solve some problems. Experience will help the student choose the easier or preferred method.
- 4) Estimation is a valuable tool for checking an answer. If an answer is unreasonable, it is possible that the wrong method was used to solve the problem.