

Let's Talk About Math

The LittleCounters® Approach to Building Early Math Skills

Setting the Table

It is very common to have young children help set the table for meals. Counting can easily be incorporated into setting the table by counting plates, forks, spoons, bowls, and so forth. Chairs and place mats can also be counted. The key is to be sure to show the numbers with your hands as you count, asking the child to also show you how many. The other key is to reinforce cardinality by always asking “How many?” after the child finishes counting the objects. It is also an excellent daily routine to instill the one-to-one correspondence principle, because it is a concrete example a young child can use to map one person to one place setting of plate, utensils, and place mat. Children who do not understand the cardinality concept will answer with a random number, sometimes their own age or the next number in the counting sequence, when asked to give the total quantity in a set. Conversation starters around setting the table could include the following:



Figure 6.1. Setting the table.

- What shape is the dinner plate?
- How many colors are on the place mat/dinner plate?
- How many plates do we need? How many people in our family?
- Do we have enough spoons? We need four.
- Grandma is coming to dinner tonight, so we'll need an extra plate at the table. Usually we have four plates, but we'll need one more. How many plates will we need?

A fun arts and crafts activity that is related to the theme of setting tables that you and your child could do together is making your own plates or place mats. You could ask the child to draw or paint objects or animals such as bumblebees on paper plates or place mats. Alternatively, painted hand-prints on a placement are also fun and are particularly useful in highlighting the one-to-one correspondence of our physical fingers and the fingerprints on the plate or place mat. Keep in mind the five counting principles— one-to-one correspondence, stable order, cardinality, abstraction, and order irrelevance—while having fun creating art!

|||||| COUNTING INGREDIENTS

Adult: Do you want to help me measure the flour for the cookies?

Child: Yes!

Adult: We need three cups of flour. Can you count to three?

Child: One, two, three!

Adult: Excellent. You counted to three. *(Adult holds up three fingers.)*

Adult: We need three cups to measure the flour because we need three cups for our cookies. Let's get our cups out! *(Cups are lined up on the counter, and one extra cup is included.)*

Adult: We need three cups. Do we have three cups? Let's count to make sure.

Child: One, two, three. *(Adult helps by moving the cups over across the counter, showing that there is one extra cup.)*

Adult: Oh, my. We have one extra cup. We'll put that one away. Now we have three. *(Adult now counts the cups again, moving them back across the counter using his or her fingers to show the numbers and then reinforces cardinality by repeating the number three.)*

Once the cookies are baked fresh from the oven, the adult and child can then count how many cookies there are and divide them equally between themselves or others.