5

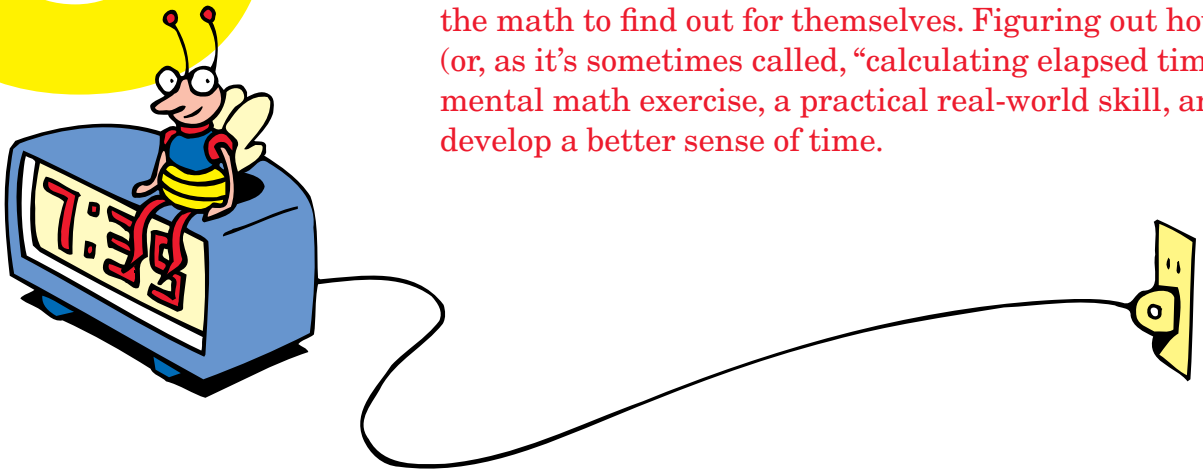
How much longer?

Materials

Clock or watch that displays minutes

"How much longer until the soccer game begins? … How long until we eat? … How much longer before the movie starts?"

Next time your children ask you "How much longer?" ask them to do the math to find out for themselves. Figuring out how much longer (or, as it's sometimes called, "calculating elapsed time") is a great mental math exercise, a practical real-world skill, and a way to develop a better sense of time.



1. Talk through the problem

Make sure your children know what time it is now and the time of the event they're waiting for.

Child: *"How long until we eat?"*

Parent: *"It's 5:18. Dinner's at 6. How many minutes until 6?"*

For ages 5–7, simplify the problem by rounding times to the nearest half hour (5:30 in this example), quarter hour (5:15), or 10 minutes (5:20).

2. Figure out how much longer

If your children need help, work with them to solve the problem in one of these ways:

Break the problem into parts. For instance, from 5:18 to 5:20 is 2 minutes, then it's 10 more minutes to 5:30, and another 30 to 6:00—42 minutes in all.

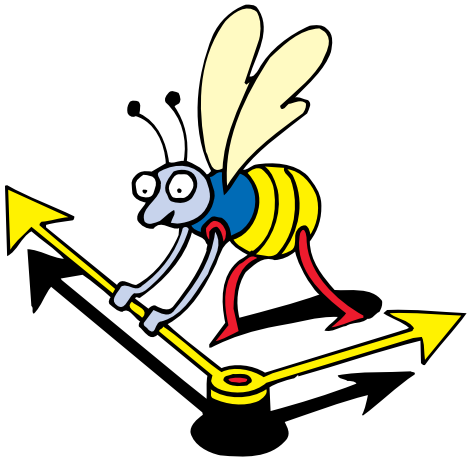
Round to a time that's easier to work with and then adjust. It's 45 minutes from 5:15 to 6:00, so it's 3 less than that—42 minutes—from 5:18 to 6:00.

Count up by ten-minute intervals. From 5:18 to 5:28 is 10 minutes. From 5:18 to 5:38 is 20 minutes, to 5:48 is 30, to 5:58 is 40, plus 2 minutes takes us to 6:00. So it's 42 minutes in all.

3. Explain solutions

If your children solved the problem without help, ask how they got their answers.

If you notice any incorrect calculations, encourage your children to explain their thinking further. They may fix their mistakes as they talk about how they got the answer. If they don't, try to help them correct their solution methods, rather than showing a new way to solve the problem.



4. What could you do in the remaining time? (optional)

To help develop a "real-life" understanding of time, ask about what could be done in the time that's left.

"So, you have about 40 minutes left until dinner. Is that enough time to clean your desk? Your whole room? Your whole room and still have some time left to play?"

When you repeat this activity

Try this when "How much longer?" is a few minutes, close to an hour, or several hours. Ask your children to explain their thinking from time to time—both when they make mistakes and when they arrive at the right answer. Otherwise, they will come to think that "How did you get your answer?" really means, "You're wrong."

Variations

Predict how much longer (ages 5–11)
Sometimes we don't have an answer for "How much longer?" We're not sure when the waitress will take our order, or when the food will arrive. We don't know how long we'll be in the check-out line, or when we'll get home if we're stuck in traffic. In situations like these, ask everyone to predict how much longer, and to explain why they think their predictions are reasonable. Write down (or remember) your predictions, and assign someone to keep track of the time. Which prediction comes closest?

For more challenge, after children make their predictions, suggest they calculate what time that will be.

"It's 3:32, and you guess it will take 45 minutes to get home. What time will it be then?"

When the wait is prolonged, ask if anyone wants to revise their predictions.

"We predicted we'd be through the check-out line in 5 minutes, but 3 minutes have passed and the person ahead of us hasn't unloaded everything from her cart yet. Do you still think we'll be through in 5 minutes, or do you want to change your predictions?"

When it seems like forever (ages 5–11)
When there's an exciting event coming up soon, ask your children to find out "how much longer" in weeks, days, or hours. Younger children can use a calendar to count how many days (or weeks). Older children can calculate how many hours until the event, and then explore questions like these:

What is the halfway point? *"When will it be halfway between now and your birthday? What will you be doing then?"*

How many minutes? *"So, you figured out that it's 63 hours until your school play. Do you think that's more than 1000 minutes from now? More than 10,000? How can you find out?"*

How long ago? *"The big soccer game is in 32 hours, and it seems like you have to wait forever! What were you doing 32 hours ago? Does it seem like that long ago?"*