

saxon math vs math u see

Saxon Math vs Math U See: A Deep Dive for Homeschoolers and Parents

Saxon Math vs Math U See are two of the most popular and respected math curricula for homeschooling families. Choosing the right math program can feel like a monumental task, especially when considering the diverse learning styles and needs of children. This article aims to provide a comprehensive, side-by-side comparison of Saxon Math and Math-U-See, delving into their pedagogical approaches, curriculum structure, teaching methods, and target audiences. We'll explore what makes each program unique, from Saxon's incremental approach and consistent review to Math-U-See's manipulatives-based, mastery-focused philosophy. By understanding the core tenets of both Saxon Math and Math-U-See, parents and educators can make a more informed decision that best suits their student's mathematical journey.

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Understanding the Core Philosophies

At the heart of any successful educational program lies its underlying philosophy. This is especially true when comparing two distinct math curricula like Saxon Math and Math-U-See. While both aim to build a strong foundation in mathematics, their fundamental beliefs about how children learn math diverge significantly. Understanding these core philosophies is the first crucial step in discerning which program might be the better fit for your specific child or classroom.

Saxon Math, developed by John Saxon, is built upon a bedrock of incremental learning and consistent, spaced repetition. The philosophy emphasizes that mathematical concepts are best absorbed and retained when introduced in small, manageable steps and then revisited frequently. This constant reinforcement is designed to build confidence and ensure that no child is left behind due to a missed foundational concept. It's a structured, systematic approach that believes in the power of practice and review to solidify understanding.

Math-U-See, on the other hand, champions a mastery-based approach heavily reliant on the use of hands-on manipulatives. The philosophy here is that true understanding of mathematical principles comes from experiencing them physically. Children learn by doing, building, and manipulating objects

that represent abstract mathematical ideas. This method prioritizes deep comprehension of each concept before moving on to the next, ensuring that students have a solid grasp of the 'why' behind the math, not just the 'how'. It's about building a strong, intuitive understanding from the ground up.

Saxon Math: The Incremental Approach

Saxon Math is renowned for its distinctive incremental approach to teaching mathematics. This method is characterized by introducing new concepts in small, bite-sized pieces, weaving them into a curriculum that consistently reinforces previously learned material. The idea is to build a strong, cumulative understanding, ensuring that students don't just memorize facts but truly internalize them.

This approach means that a typical Saxon Math lesson includes a warm-up activity, introduction of a new concept, guided practice, and then a set of problems that include both the new concept and review of many previous concepts. This constant recycling of material serves as a powerful retention tool. For students who thrive on structure and repetition, Saxon Math can be incredibly effective. It builds confidence through predictable patterns and the satisfaction of consistently solving problems, including those they've encountered before.

The scope and sequence of Saxon Math are meticulously planned. New concepts are introduced gradually, and then they reappear in homework assignments and tests at increasing intervals. This spaced repetition, a well-established learning principle, helps move information from short-term to long-term memory. This can be particularly beneficial for students who struggle with retention or who need multiple exposures to a concept before it clicks. The curriculum progresses steadily, ensuring a solid foundation before tackling more complex topics.

Key Features of Saxon Math's Incremental Approach

- **Small Doses of New Information:** New concepts are introduced in minimal amounts to avoid

overwhelming the student.

- **Constant Review:** Previously learned concepts are regularly revisited in problem sets and assessments.
- **Cumulative Learning:** Each new topic builds upon a solid foundation of prior knowledge.
- **Predictable Structure:** Lessons follow a consistent format, which can be comforting for many learners.
- **Emphasis on Practice:** Ample opportunities for practice are provided to solidify understanding.

Math-U-See: The Manipulatives and Mastery Method

Math-U-See operates on a fundamentally different pedagogical principle: mastery learning through hands-on manipulation. The core belief is that children grasp abstract mathematical concepts most effectively when they can physically interact with representations of those concepts. This is where the distinctive colorful blocks and other manipulatives come into play.

The Math-U-See system is designed to ensure that a student fully understands a concept before moving on to the next. This "mastery" approach means that students might spend more time on a particular topic until they can demonstrate proficiency. The progression is not strictly dictated by grade level but by the student's demonstrated understanding. This can be incredibly beneficial for students who need more time to absorb information or who have learning differences that make traditional pacing difficult.

The use of manipulatives is central to the Math-U-See experience. For example, when learning addition, students might use blocks to represent the numbers and physically combine them. This tactile

and visual engagement helps build a deeper, intuitive understanding of mathematical operations. Instead of just memorizing facts, students are encouraged to explore and discover the underlying logic of mathematics. This hands-on exploration is key to building long-term conceptual understanding.

Key Features of Math-U-See's Mastery Method

- **Manipulative-Based Learning:** Extensive use of hands-on tools to teach abstract concepts.
- **Mastery Approach:** Students must demonstrate proficiency before advancing to new topics.
- **Conceptual Understanding:** Focus on understanding the 'why' behind mathematical principles.
- **Individualized Pacing:** Allows students to learn at their own speed.
- **Visual and Kinesthetic Learning:** Caters to students who learn best by seeing and doing.

Curriculum Structure and Progression

When comparing Saxon Math and Math-U-See, understanding their respective structures and how they progress through mathematical concepts is crucial for making an informed choice. Both curricula are comprehensive, but their pathways to mathematical proficiency are quite distinct.

Saxon Math typically structures its curriculum in a series of levels, often aligned with grade levels. Each level is divided into daily lessons. A typical lesson will include a review section, introduction of a new concept, guided practice, and then a problem set. The problem sets are a hallmark of Saxon, as they consistently include problems from previous lessons. This means a student might be solving problems involving fractions, decimals, and geometry all within the same homework assignment, even

if the new concept introduced that day was only about simple algebraic equations. This integrated review helps reinforce retention and ensures that foundational skills are not forgotten as new material is introduced.

Math-U-See, in contrast, structures its curriculum around specific mathematical topics and skills, rather than strictly by grade level. The progression is guided by the student's mastery of each concept. For instance, a student might work through addition until they have truly mastered it, including various strategies and applications, before moving on to subtraction. The curriculum is divided into levels, but the movement through these levels is fluid and dependent on demonstrated understanding. Each level typically comes with a set of instructional DVDs, student workbooks, and the essential manipulatives. The lessons often involve direct instruction via the DVDs, followed by practice using the manipulatives and then workbook exercises.

Saxon Math Progression

- **Grade-Level Alignment:** Curriculum is generally organized by grade.
- **Daily Lessons:** Consistent daily structure including review, new concept, and practice.
- **Cumulative Problem Sets:** Homework includes a mix of current and past material.
- **Systematic Advancement:** New concepts are added incrementally.

Math-U-See Progression

- **Topic-Based Levels:** Organized by specific mathematical concepts.

- **Mastery-Driven Pacing:** Students advance only after mastering a concept.
- **Hands-on Exploration:** Manipulatives are integrated into the learning process.
- **Flexible Advancement:** Less rigid adherence to grade-level timelines.

Teaching Methodology and Resources

The tools and methods employed by Saxon Math and Math-U-See are central to their effectiveness and appeal. Each program offers a distinct learning experience, catering to different teaching styles and student preferences.

Saxon Math's teaching methodology relies heavily on teacher-led instruction, though it can be adapted for independent study. The teacher's guide is comprehensive, providing step-by-step instructions for introducing each new concept. Practice is paramount, and the workbook problems are designed to ensure thorough exposure. While manipulatives aren't a core component of the Saxon approach, some supplementary materials or real-world examples might be used to illustrate concepts. The focus is on direct instruction, guided practice, and independent problem-solving. The materials typically include a student textbook, a solutions manual, and a teacher's edition. The emphasis is on clear explanations and consistent reinforcement through written practice.

Math-U-See's teaching methodology is distinctive due to its strong reliance on visual and kinesthetic learning. The program comes with a set of instructional DVDs featuring Steve Demme, the creator, who explains each concept and demonstrates its use with the accompanying manipulatives. The manipulatives are not just optional aids; they are integral to the learning process, allowing students to physically build and understand mathematical ideas. After the instructional segment, students work through problems in their workbooks, often continuing to use the manipulatives as needed. The complete Math-U-See kit typically includes the DVDs, student workbook, solutions manual, and the

specific set of manipulatives for that level. This multi-sensory approach is designed to build a deep, lasting understanding.

Saxon Math Resources

- Teacher's Edition with daily lesson plans
- Student Textbook
- Solutions Manual
- Fact cards and charts (sometimes optional)

Math-U-See Resources

- Instructional DVDs
- Student Workbook
- Solutions Manual
- Customizable Manipulatives (blocks, fraction overlays, etc.)

Student Engagement and Learning Styles

The effectiveness of any math curriculum hinges on its ability to engage students and cater to diverse learning styles. Both Saxon Math and Math-U-See have unique strengths in this regard, appealing to different types of learners.

Saxon Math tends to engage students who thrive in a structured, predictable environment. Its incremental approach and constant review can build confidence for students who appreciate routine and the satisfaction of mastering small, manageable steps. The repetitive nature of the problem sets ensures that students get ample practice, which can be very engaging for those who learn best through repetition and drills. However, students who are easily bored by repetition or who struggle to see the relevance of abstract problems might find Saxon Math less engaging. The lack of significant hands-on components might also be a drawback for kinesthetic learners.

Math-U-See, with its emphasis on manipulatives and conceptual understanding, often shines with visual and kinesthetic learners. The ability to physically interact with mathematical concepts—building numbers, seeing fractions, manipulating geometric shapes—can make abstract ideas tangible and exciting. This hands-on approach can lead to deeper engagement and a more intuitive understanding for students who struggle with traditional lecture-style teaching or abstract symbols. The mastery-based pacing also allows students to fully grasp each concept, reducing frustration and building a stronger sense of accomplishment. For students who are easily distracted or who need more active learning methods, Math-U-See can be a game-changer.

Saxon Math Appeal

- Students who benefit from structure and routine.
- Learners who gain confidence through repetition and incremental success.

- Students who are comfortable with traditional textbook and worksheet formats.

Math-U-See Appeal

- Visual and kinesthetic learners who benefit from hands-on activities.
- Students who need a deeper conceptual understanding of math.
- Learners who require more time to master concepts.
- Children who struggle with traditional, abstract math instruction.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Saxon Math

Saxon Math has been a staple in homeschooling for decades, and for good reason. Its methodical, incremental approach has proven effective for many students. However, like any curriculum, it also has its limitations.

One of the greatest strengths of Saxon Math is its unparalleled emphasis on review and retention. The constant recycling of concepts ensures that students build a strong, cumulative foundation. This is particularly beneficial for students who might otherwise forget previously learned material. The structured, predictable lesson format can also be a significant advantage, providing a clear roadmap for both the teacher and the student. This consistency can foster confidence and reduce anxiety. For students who are disciplined and enjoy a systematic approach, Saxon Math can be a highly effective tool for building mathematical fluency.

On the other hand, Saxon Math can be perceived as repetitive by some students, potentially leading to boredom or frustration if not managed well. The lack of significant hands-on manipulatives means that some learners, particularly kinesthetic or visual learners, might struggle to grasp abstract concepts as deeply. The pace, while incremental, can still feel too fast for students who need more time to solidify understanding, and the sheer volume of problems in some assignments can be daunting. Some parents also find the teacher training or the need for significant parent involvement to be a hurdle.

Saxon Math Strengths

- Exceptional review and retention of concepts.
- Builds a strong, cumulative mathematical foundation.
- Structured and predictable lesson format.
- Promotes student confidence through consistent success.

Saxon Math Weaknesses

- Can be perceived as repetitive and potentially boring.
- Limited use of hands-on manipulatives.
- Pace might be too fast for some learners.
- Volume of practice problems can be overwhelming.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Math-U-See

Math-U-See offers a unique and highly regarded approach to mathematics education, particularly for students who learn best through tactile and visual engagement. Its strengths lie in its innovative methodology, but it also presents certain challenges.

The most significant strength of Math-U-See is its mastery-based, manipulative-driven approach. By allowing students to physically interact with mathematical concepts, it fosters deep conceptual understanding and intuition. This is invaluable for demystifying abstract math and building a strong foundation for future learning. The individualized pacing is another major advantage, ensuring that no student is rushed and that each concept is fully absorbed before moving on. The instructional DVDs provide clear, concise explanations, making it accessible for parents who may not feel confident teaching math themselves.

However, the mastery-based approach means that students may progress more slowly through the curriculum compared to traditional or Saxon-style programs. This could be a concern for families who are on a strict timeline or who are concerned about covering a certain amount of material by a specific grade level. The cost of the complete kits, which include the manipulatives and DVDs, can also be higher than other curricula. Some students might eventually outgrow the need for manipulatives, and transitioning away from them smoothly could require careful planning. Additionally, the reliance on DVDs means less direct, in-person teacher interaction for some learners.

Math-U-See Strengths

- Deep conceptual understanding through manipulatives.
- Individualized pacing caters to diverse learning speeds.
- Excellent for visual and kinesthetic learners.

- Clear instruction via DVDs can support parents.

Math-U-See Weaknesses

- Slower progression through material.
- Higher initial cost for comprehensive kits.
- Potential need for transition away from manipulatives.
- Less direct, real-time teacher interaction.

Choosing the Right Fit for Your Child

Selecting between Saxon Math and Math-U-See ultimately comes down to understanding your child's unique learning profile, your teaching style, and your educational goals. There isn't a universally "better" program; rather, there's a program that is better suited for a particular student at a particular time.

Consider your child's personality and how they learn best. Does your child thrive on routine, repetition, and structured problem-solving? If so, Saxon Math's incremental approach might be a natural fit. Does your child learn by doing, by seeing and touching? Are they easily frustrated by abstract concepts, or do they benefit from a slower, more in-depth exploration of each topic? If these characteristics resonate, Math-U-See's manipulative-based mastery approach could be ideal. Think about their attention span and their ability to work independently versus needing direct instruction.

Your own comfort level as an educator also plays a role. Are you comfortable with a more hands-on, discovery-based approach, or do you prefer a clear, step-by-step script? Saxon Math offers a very structured guide for teachers, while Math-U-See's DVDs can be a significant support for parents who are less confident in their own math abilities. Evaluating these factors will help you navigate the decision-making process and steer you toward the curriculum that will foster the most positive and effective math education for your child.

Conclusion

The journey through mathematics is a crucial one, and selecting the right curriculum can significantly impact a child's engagement and success. Both Saxon Math and Math-U-See stand out as robust, well-regarded programs, each with a distinct pedagogical philosophy. Saxon Math's strength lies in its time-tested incremental approach and consistent review, building a solid foundation through repetition and structured practice. It's an excellent choice for students who benefit from routine and clear progression. Conversely, Math-U-See champions a mastery-based system that leverages hands-on manipulatives to create deep conceptual understanding, making it a powerful tool for visual and kinesthetic learners who need to explore and build mathematical ideas tangibly. By carefully considering your child's learning style, your teaching approach, and the specific strengths each program offers, you can confidently choose the path that will best support their mathematical growth and foster a lifelong appreciation for the subject.

Q: Which curriculum is better for a child struggling with math anxiety?

A: For a child experiencing math anxiety, Math-U-See might offer a more supportive environment. Its focus on mastery and the use of manipulatives can help build confidence by allowing the child to truly understand concepts before moving on, reducing the fear of falling behind. The hands-on approach can make math feel less abstract and intimidating.

Q: Is Saxon Math suitable for gifted students?

A: Saxon Math can be suitable for gifted students, but often requires enrichment. While the pace is incremental, gifted students might move through the material quickly. Parents may need to supplement with more challenging problems or advanced topics to keep gifted learners fully engaged.

Q: How do the costs of Saxon Math and Math-U-See compare?

A: Generally, Math-U-See kits, which include manipulatives and DVDs, tend to have a higher upfront cost than Saxon Math textbooks and workbooks. However, the manipulatives can be reused for multiple children, potentially offsetting the initial investment over time. Saxon Math may have more affordable consumable workbooks.

Q: Which curriculum is more parent-intensive to teach?

A: Saxon Math can be quite parent-intensive, especially if the parent is the primary teacher. It requires careful lesson preparation and consistent explanation of new concepts, along with monitoring the extensive practice problem sets. Math-U-See's DVDs can reduce the direct teaching burden on parents, making it less intensive in terms of content delivery, though parental oversight is still necessary.

Q: Can I switch between Saxon Math and Math-U-See if it's not a good fit?

A: Yes, it is possible to switch between curricula, but it's important to assess where the child is mathematically. If switching to Math-U-See from Saxon, consider using diagnostic assessments to determine the appropriate level to start with. If switching from Math-U-See to Saxon, you'll need to ensure the child has mastered the prerequisite concepts for the Saxon level.

Q: Are there any online components to these curricula?

A: While the core curricula are print-based, both Saxon Math and Math-U-See have explored digital offerings or companion resources. Math-U-See has a strong emphasis on its instructional DVDs. Saxon Math may have some online practice resources or supplementary digital tools available through publishers like Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Q: Which curriculum better prepares students for standardized tests?

A: Both curricula aim to build strong mathematical foundations that would generally prepare students for standardized tests. Saxon Math's emphasis on broad review can help ensure retention of a wide range of skills, which is beneficial for test-taking. Math-U-See's focus on deep conceptual understanding can equip students with the problem-solving abilities often tested.

Q: How do these programs handle different learning styles within a single family?

A: This is where careful consideration is key. If you have children with very different learning styles, you might find one program aligns better with one child, and you might explore supplementary resources or a different curriculum for another. For example, a child who thrives with Saxon might benefit from hands-on math games as a supplement, while a kinesthetic learner in Math-U-See might need additional structured practice.

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