

How I Stage Mathematical Magic Tricks for Children

by Rodeo the Magnifico (a.k.a. Rodi Steinig)

INGREDIENTS (and where to procure them)

- 5 good age-appropriate magic tricks. (You can learn these at G4G events.)
- 1 stick. (Find one that feels good; look in the woods or at the beach or in your yard.)
- 1 roll of sparkly ribbon. (Go to a craft supplies store.)
- 1 straw hat. (Take it from the scarecrow in your yard – the more worn the better.)
- 1 cape, worn with the collar upturned. (Borrow it from your partner’s Jack the Ripper Halloween costume.)
- 1 black outfit to wear under the cape. Preferably black jeans torn at the knees and a flowy, frayed black shirt. Since children don’t usually notice and judge footwear the way adults do, your shoes probably don’t matter.
- 1 stick horse. (Go to a toy store – they sell stuffed-animal horses’ heads on short wooden broomsticks. Or use a stick horse that belongs to your child. Get permission, of course.)

PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

- MOST importantly, practice your tricks a lot.
- Wrap some sparkly ribbon around your found stick to create your wand.
- Wrap one layer of sparkly ribbon around your hat in the hatband position. Tie the ends together in a small double knot. Trim off the ends.
- Name your sidekick (the stick horse) something generic in another language. For instance, my sidekick is named Caballo Magico, which is Spanish for Magic Horse.
- Tie some sparkly ribbon around your sidekick’s neck. Trim off the shorter end. Let the longer end flow loosely to project a horse’s mane blowing in the wind.
- Give yourself a Magician Name. Consider many names and choose the one that makes you smile when you say it.
- Create a personality quirk for your sidekick. For example, Caballo Magico is very sensitive. And he does not allow anyone outside the family to touch him.
- OPTIONAL: Find some theme music. I’m looking for an instrumental rodeo tune to play as I make a grand entrance. Please send suggestions to rodi@mathrenaissance.com.

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS, MAGICIAN-IN-TRAINING

- Ask the children for advice about the staging of the tricks. Be self-deprecating. Say “I’m a magician-in-training.” They will ask excitedly “Really?!” They will be impressed when you reply in the affirmative.

- Give the children ownership by telling them that you have two goals: to get better at performing the tricks and to give them a trick to take home that they can perform for their families or friends.
- Solicit from the children a magic word or gesture to use in performing the tricks. Take notes on these suggestions. Ask for instructions on how to spell the magic words. Then use their suggestions as you perform.

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS, MAGICIAN

- If you are performing on Halloween, before telling the children your Magician Name, ask them to guess what your costume is. They will guess “a rodeo vampire?”
- Get out your wand. The children will initiate a debate about its validity:
 - CHILDREN: “That’s just a stick!”
 - YOU: “Isn’t that what Harry Potter’s wand was, a branch from a holly tree with a feather in it? This is a tree branch with a magical ribbon around it. What’s the difference?”
- Present your sidekick. One excited child will call out “It’s the ribbon that makes him magic!” You will agree. (On another day when you introduce a new magic trick, that same child will call out most assuredly “It’s the ribbon that makes him magic!” You will agree.)
- Introduce your sidekick by name. Several of the children will ask what his name means. Cover your sidekick’s ears so that he doesn’t hear what his name means.
- Talk to your sidekick when you perform the tricks. Whisper in his ear sometimes. Allow the children to ask him questions, to which he will respond by nodding or shaking his head.
- On another day when you bring in a new magic trick, one child will ask “What is your horse’s name again? What does his name mean?” Another concerned child will demand of you “Don’t tell the horse what his name means!”
- When the children start interacting with your sidekick, you will know that you have fully brought them into your magical world. Your worldbuilding has worked. Congratulations!



NOTE: For many years, I have written and talked about the math I do with children. Sometimes, mathematicians say to me, “I could never do what you do because I don’t know how to talk to children.” I believe this is a coachable skill. This essay, a companion piece to my G4G16 talk “My Evolutionary Stages toward Becoming a Magician,” provides tips on how to talk to children as you stage child-friendly tricks for dramatic and educational effect.