

A Math Makeover

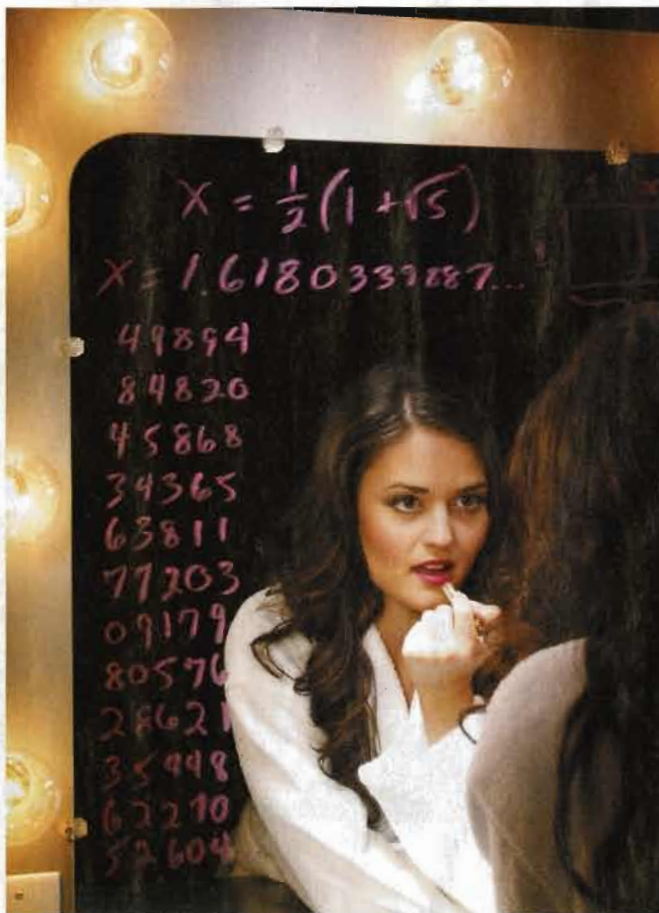
OMG! Actress and mathematician Danica McKellar wants girls to know that being good at numbers is cool.

BY PEG TYRE

WHEN YOU THINK about what young Hollywood actresses get up to in their spare time these days, you're likely to envision wild parties, rehab or jail. When Danica McKellar, Winnie on the '90s hit television show "The Wonder Years," isn't on set, though, she's writing. No tell-all bio here. She's penned a book aimed at helping young girls survive—and even thrive—in math class. "When girls see the antics of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, they think that being fun and glamorous also means being dumb and irresponsible," says McKellar. "But I want to show them that being smart is cool. Being good at math is cool. And not only that, it can help them get what they want out of life."

To that end, her book, titled "Math Doesn't Suck," uses cutesy graphics and teen-magazine staples like personality quizzes, horoscopes and straight-from-the-mall examples to spell out often confusing concepts like reciprocal fractions and prime factorization. It also contains syrupy dollops of just-between-us-girls encouragement, three miniprofiles of drop-dead-gorgeous mathematicians, as well as practical tips for avoiding sloppy mistakes on homework, overcoming test-day brain freeze and suggestions on what to do when algebra gets you down. (Hint: don't be afraid to sound dumb in class. Go ahead and ask.)

McKellar, once America's best-known middle schooler, says her book reflects her own real-life struggles with the subject. "I was good at math in elementary school, and then around seventh grade the work got harder and I hit a rough patch," says McKellar, who is now 32. Fortunately, a patient, funny teacher got her back on track by using visual imagery and real-life



ADD IT UP: McKellar says math isn't just for nerdy guys anymore

examples she could relate to. With her newfound confidence, McKellar aced the subject straight through high school. But she didn't stop there. In between acting gigs, she enrolled as a film major at UCLA. But after taking a college-level math course she realized, "I really was good at this!" She changed her major to math. "I thought it was just for nerdy white guys, but it's not. It turns out lots of different kinds of people like math," she says. She graduated with high honors in 1998. Around that time, she also became the only television actress in America to

coauthor a groundbreaking mathematical physics theorem; it was published in the *Journal of Physics* and bears her name (the Chayes-McKellar-Winn theorem). These days, acting is her first love, but she still reads math textbooks in her spare time and answers math problems on her fan Web site.

Her book, which is out in August, has already been given top marks by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. "She's a terrific role model," says NCTM's president Francis (Skip) Fennell. But do girls really need female-friendly math books today? The era when schoolgirls trailed far behind boys in math achievement is long gone. These days, girls take as many high-level college-prep-type math courses as boys—and do just about as well. In the work world, young women are flocking to professions like accounting, medicine and the biological sciences that depend on math. But despite tens of millions of dollars being spent on mentoring programs, recruitment and special stipends, far fewer women than men enter "pure math" professions, and the number of women mathematicians and engineers remains low (28 percent and 11 percent, respectively). "We've gotten girls to take math. We've gotten girls to use math," says feminist educational researcher Patricia Campbell, who evaluates math and science programs for the National Science Foundation. "But we haven't gotten them to love it."

Still, is it necessary to teach a girl about ratios, for instance, by asking her to figure out how much lip gloss she owns compared with her sister?

McKellar acknowledges that her "Pretty in Pink" approach might not work for everyone.

"I'm trying to reach the girls who traditional math instruction isn't reaching. The ones who love fashion, who love accessories and who believe they simply aren't good at math." And she insists her message is about substance as well as style. "I want to tell girls that cute and dumb isn't as good as cute and smart." That's a notion you can count on. ■

Reality Math

An excerpt from the book "Math Doesn't Suck":

■ Say you have \$50, and you want to buy a fabulous blue sundress that costs \$62. Bummer! Not enough money. But wait, there's a sale tag that says it's $\frac{1}{5}$ off. Do you have enough money now?