



Math whiz and *Wonder Years* star **Danica McKellar** adds a new role to her impressive résumé: mom

# Plus One

## Do natural childbirth and the quadratic equation share a common denominator?

It just might be Danica McKellar, the former child actress who first stole hearts as Winnie Cooper on the late '80s hit show *The Wonder Years* before carving out a new niche as a math advocate for girls with three best-selling books: *Math Doesn't Suck: How to Survive Middle School Math Without Losing Your Mind or Breaking a Nail*; *Kiss My Math: Showing Pre-Algebra Who's Boss*; and *Hot X: Algebra Exposed*.

By Lauren Paige Kennedy, WebMD Contributing Writer  
Photography by Cathryn Farnsworth

"During the toughest moments," McKellar tells WebMD of her 36-hour labor, "I kept thinking about what I tell my readers about their abilities in math, and it resonated with labor, too: You're more capable than you think you are."

Which is not to say McKellar didn't struggle, like many girls do as they tackle algebraic problems just as puberty hits, as she rode out one painful contraction after another. She faced moments where she wanted to quit. With the support of her doctor, her husband, and her doula (birth coach) and the practice of self-hypnosis, she got through her long labor.

"My goal was to do natural childbirth," she explains. "But I didn't know if it would [fully] go that way until the baby was actually born." McKellar gave birth to her son, Draco—named for a constellation in the sky—"on Labor Day" she says, in a Los Angeles-area hospital under the supervision of a doctor, who happily worked with her doula. "I wanted Western medicine close...I wanted to be prepared, just in case."

McKellar's reward, she says, for resisting an epidural (pain medication delivered through a needle inserted into the spinal cord, numbing the spinal nerves that cause feeling in the lower body) was that she was alert and mobile enough to "pull out Draco myself." When her baby was ready, her doctor invited her to sit up and "come and get him!" Beaming, she relates, "It was one of the most amazing moments of my life."

### Natural Selection

McKellar, 36, says she's a firm believer that "every woman has an inner sense that guides her" when it comes to pregnancy, labor, and breastfeeding, and "that we should never judge another woman's choices." She says that a strict approach to nutrition before and after birth, the goal of natural labor, and exclusive breastfeeding for at least six months was right for her.

After a miscarriage in October 2009, McKellar and husband, composer Mike Verta, decided to keep mum when she found herself pregnant again just months later—even when *Maxim* magazine asked her to do a sexy lingerie shoot timed to when she was 11 weeks along. "I wasn't really showing yet, but I couldn't suck in my stomach," she laughs about the photos. "Let's just say no one asked me if I'd had any work done," she adds, referring to her suddenly swollen breasts.

Her discipline translated to other areas: She gave up sugar, white flour, gluten, anything artificial, caffeine, and alcohol during pregnancy and continues with the same diet now that she's breastfeeding.

But not every woman needs to follow McKellar's choices. "Many women think

they need to eat a 'perfect' diet to make nutritious milk," says Marianne Neifert, MD, a pediatrician, national breastfeeding expert, and author of *Great Expectations: The Essential Guide to Breastfeeding*. "I like to keep it simple," Neifert advises. "Maintain your good eating habits from pregnancy while you nurse, and keep taking your prenatal vitamins."

### Feeding Time

McKellar used her own advice to conquer her initial challenges with breastfeeding. Her books address the mental blocks that can stall potential math stars before they even attempt to solve that first equation. "So many girls say 'I can't do math' before they even try it. They have to build their confidence and know that by sticking with it, they can have success."

The same holds true for nursing, McKellar believes. Some women and babies face physical challenges that make it impossible, while others simply need

support and professional help to get over the initial hurdles: difficult latching, sore nipples, low milk supply, and mastitis, a painful breast infection, all of which McKellar had.

If a woman can breastfeed, there are significant health benefits for both mother and baby, says Neifert, including a lower risk of ear infections, asthma, and type 1 and 2 diabetes for babies, and a reduced risk of type 2 diabetes as well as breast and ovarian cancers for women, she says.

Still acting (McKellar has done TV guest spots on ABC's *How I Met Your Mother* and CBS's *The Big Bang Theory*, and voices an animated character on *Young Justice* for Cartoon Network) even as she celebrates her third best-seller, she's loving motherhood so much that she and her husband are already planning for baby No. 2.

"The plan is to have them two and a half years apart," she says, calculating the optimal time between siblings. Which means, if you do the math, she'll be pregnant again this time next year. Stay tuned. ●



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