Positional Phrases: Using 'In', 'On' and 'Under' Correctly in Reception

Positional phrases like 'in', 'on' and 'under' help children describe where things are. Reception children learn these words through play and picture-matching games. It builds on what they already know from maths lessons and prepares them for writing in Year 1.

What positional phrases are

Positional phrases are words that tell us where something is. 'In', 'on' and 'under' are the most common ones that Reception children learn. You probably use them all day without thinking about it: 'Put your coat in the cupboard.' 'Sit on the chair.' 'The ball is under the table.' These words help children describe the world around them. You may have noticed your child already knows similar words from maths lessons – they use 'behind', 'beside' and 'in front' to talk about position during number activities. In Reception, children start to use positional words more deliberately in their speech and, later, in their writing.

What happens in Reception

In Reception, teachers use lots of play and games to help children learn positional phrases. They might read stories where the teacher or children move toys or objects around, saying 'The mouse went under the log' or 'The teddy is on the shelf'. Picture-matching activities are popular: a child might see a drawing and choose the right word to match it. Teachers also create silly or surprising moments – hiding a toy under something, then asking 'Where is it?' – because children learn best when they're having fun and the learning feels like play. Children hear these words again and again, from their teacher, their classmates and in the books they share.

What this means for your child

Learning positional words helps your child talk more precisely and creatively. Instead of just pointing, they can say where something is. This is a normal part of learning to speak and write clearly. Some children pick these words up naturally from listening; others need a bit of practice. There's no need to worry if your child hasn't mastered all three words by the end of Reception – they'll keep practising throughout Year 1 and beyond. Every child develops at their own pace. What matters is that they hear these words used often, see them in context and feel happy to have a go at using them themselves.

How you can help at home

You don't need special materials or lessons – just everyday moments. Build with your child: 'Put the brick in the box.' 'The block is on top.' Hide toys and ask 'Where is the teddy now?' under the blanket, inside the bag, on the shelf. Play simple games: 'I spy' can include positions – 'I spy with my little eye something under my foot.' Draw simple pictures together and label them: a cat on a fence, a bird in a tree, a ball under a chair. Use positional words naturally when you talk about your day: 'I put your lunch in your lunchbox.' Read picture books and chat about what's happening – 'The rabbit is hopping under the fence.' Make it playful, not a lesson. Little and often is better than long drills.

Questions parents often ask

Will my child be behind if they don't know all three words? No. Learning prepositions is gradual. Children often understand the words before they use them confidently. **Should I correct my child every time they get it wrong?** It's better to model the right word gently. If your child says 'The cat is on the box', you might say, 'Yes, the cat is on the box' – repeating it correctly without making them feel wrong. **Does this matter for school readiness?** Understanding position words is useful but not a measure of readiness. School will continue teaching them. **What if my child speaks English as an additional language?** Positional words are especially valuable for multilingual children. Keep talking about position in simple language and they'll learn alongside their English.

Sources

- Department for Education: Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage
- Department for Education: National Curriculum English programme of study (Key Stage 1)