

## Big, Bigger, Biggest: Comparing Size with Direct and Indirect Measurement in Reception

A gentle guide to how children in Reception learn to compare the size of objects using words like 'big', 'bigger', and 'biggest', and how they use simple tools to measure things.

### What is comparing size?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for most children), children begin to explore maths through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework. This is the set of standards that describes what children should be learning. One key part of this is learning how to compare the size of different objects. Instead of using rulers, children use their eyes and hands to see which object is larger or smaller. They learn to use a specific set of words to describe these differences, helping them understand the world around them and preparing them for more formal maths in Year 1.

### How children learn to measure

Children learn to compare size in two main ways. First is 'direct measurement', which simply means putting two objects side by side to see which one is taller or longer. Second is 'indirect measurement'. This happens when two things cannot be moved next to each other; for example, comparing the width of two different doorways. In this case, a child might use a piece of string or a wooden block as a 'go-between' to see which gap is wider. They also practice ordering three or more items from smallest to largest, using the words 'big', 'bigger', and 'biggest'.

### What this means for your child

This stage of learning is all about building confidence and curiosity. Your child is learning to notice patterns and differences in the physical world. For children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language, this is a wonderful way to build vocabulary through touch and sight. By focusing on these basic concepts, children develop the logical thinking skills they need before they move on to using standard units, like centimetres, in later years. Every child progresses at their own pace, and the goal is to make maths feel natural and fun.

### Simple ways to help at home

You do not need any special equipment to support your child; you can use everyday items like shoes, favourite toys, or books. Try playing a 'size hunt' where you find three things and arrange them from smallest to largest. While tidying up, you might ask, 'Which of these blocks is the biggest?' or 'Can we find something bigger than this spoon?'. Keep these moments short and playful. If you are unsure how your child is getting on, your child's teacher can share the specific activities they are using in the classroom.

### Common questions

Parents often wonder if they should start teaching their children how to use a ruler. At this stage, the focus is on 'non-standard' measurement—using objects rather than numbers. It is more important that they understand the concept of 'bigger' and 'smaller' than it is for them to read a scale. You might also wonder

if this is the same as learning about weight or capacity (how much a container holds). While these are all part of comparing things, size focuses specifically on length, height, and width. If you have concerns about your child's progress, your school's headteacher or class teacher is the best person to speak with.

## Sources

- Department for Education: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework
- GOV.UK: National Curriculum in England