Does Order Matter? Adding Three Numbers in Any Order in Year 2 Maths

A simple guide to helping your child add three numbers together by finding 'friendly' pairs first, making maths feel easier and more playful.

What is adding three numbers?

In the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)—the period of learning for children from birth to five, including Reception—children begin to explore how numbers work. As they move towards Year 2, they learn that when adding three single-digit numbers together, they don't have to start from the left and work across. Instead, they can look at the numbers and choose which two to add first. This is a helpful trick that makes mental maths quicker and more confident. It is all about finding a way to make the sum feel 'friendlier' before finishing the calculation.

How does it work?

The secret is to look for a 'friendly pair' first. A friendly pair might be two numbers that add up to 10 (known as number bonds to 10), or a 'double' (like 4 and 4). For example, if a child sees 3 + 7 + 2, they can spot that 3 and 7 make 10. Adding 10 and 2 is much simpler than adding 3 and 7 and then 2. By reordering the numbers, the child turns a three-step problem into a simple two-step one. This approach helps children move away from counting on their fingers and towards more efficient mental strategies.

What this means for your child

Your child is learning that numbers are flexible. Understanding that the order of numbers doesn't change the final answer is a big step in their mathematical thinking. It helps them build confidence with the National Curriculum (the official map of what children should learn in each school year) requirements for Year 2. Whether your child has Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or is learning English as an additional language, this visual way of 'spotting' pairs can make maths feel more like a puzzle and less like a chore.

Simple ways to help at home

You can practice this in short, playful bursts during the day. While setting the table or playing with toys, you could say, 'I have 3 blue blocks, 5 red blocks, and 2 green blocks. Can you find a friendly pair to make 10 first?' Avoid drilling or pressure; instead, keep it light and everyday. You might use coins, pasta shapes, or buttons to show how the numbers can be moved around. If you are unsure which method your child is using in class, a quick chat with their teacher can help you use the same language at home.

Common questions

Parents often ask if children must always find a pair that makes 10. The answer is no; any strategy that makes the sum easier for the child is a win. Some children prefer doubles, while others are happy working left to right. The goal is to encourage them to think about the most efficient way to reach the answer. You may also wonder when this starts; while it is a key part of the Year 2 curriculum, introducing the idea of 'friendly numbers' in Reception through play helps build a strong foundation for later years.

Sources

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