

Full, Empty or Just Right? Comparing Capacity in Reception

A gentle guide to helping your child in Reception explore capacity—learning how much a container can hold—through simple, playful activities at home.

What is capacity?

Capacity is a maths term that describes how much a container can hold. In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children begin to explore this through hands-on play. Instead of using rulers or scales, they use their senses to see, feel, and pour. They learn to notice that a tall, thin glass might hold the same amount as a short, wide bowl. It is all about exploring the space inside an object, whether that is filled with water, sand, or dried pasta.

What your child will do at school

In the classroom, children learn through the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)—the framework that sets the standards for learning and development for children from birth to age 5. Your child will likely spend time in a water or sand tray, pouring liquids and solids from one vessel to another. They will practice using words like 'full', 'empty', 'half full', 'more', and 'less'. They might experiment by seeing how many small cups of water it takes to fill one large jug, helping them understand that different containers hold different amounts.

Why this is important

Exploring capacity is a vital building block for later maths. By playing with containers now, children develop a 'feel' for measurement and volume. This hands-on experience helps them understand the world around them and prepares them for more formal measuring in later years. It also encourages them to make predictions—guessing which container holds more—and then testing those ideas. This process of trial and error is a key part of how young children develop logical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Simple ways to play at home

You do not need any special equipment to help your child; your kitchen is the perfect place to start. While helping with the washing up or during bath time, you can ask, 'Which cup holds more water?' or 'Can you fill this jug to the top?' Let them pour water or dry rice between different containers to see what happens. Keep it light and playful. If your child has SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or is learning English, focusing on the physical action of pouring and using simple, repeated words can be a wonderful way to build their confidence.

Common questions

Parents often wonder if they should be teaching their children to measure in millilitres or litres. At this age, the focus is on comparing and describing rather than using exact numbers. The goal is for children to understand the concept of 'more' or 'less' through experience. Every school may approach these activities slightly differently to suit their pupils, so if you would like to know exactly how your child is being supported, your child's teacher will be happy to share more details with you.

Sources

- Department for Education, Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage