Heavier or Lighter? Comparing Weight with a Balance Scale in Reception

A gentle introduction to helping your child in Reception explore weight using a balance scale, focusing on simple words like 'heavier' and 'lighter'.

What is comparing weight?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children begin to explore 'mass', which is simply how heavy an object is. Instead of using numbers or scales with dials, they start by comparing two things to see which one is heavier or lighter. This is part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the curriculum that sets the standards for learning and development for children from birth to age five. By using a balance scale—a tool with two trays that tips toward the heavier side—children can see weight in action. It is a hands-on way to introduce early maths concepts through play and discovery.

How it works in practice

When children use a balance scale, they place one object in each tray. If one side goes down, that object is 'heavier'. If the other side stays up, it is 'lighter'. If the trays stay level, the objects are 'the same as' each other. For example, a child might compare a plastic toy and a metal spoon. They observe the scale tipping and use these words to describe what they see. This physical experience helps them understand that weight is a property of an object, and it allows them to test their own ideas about the world around them.

Why this matters for your child

Learning to compare weight builds a foundation for later maths reasoning. It encourages children to make predictions and then check if they are right. A common misconception for young children is thinking that 'bigger' always means 'heavier'—for instance, believing a large balloon is heavier than a small stone. By using a balance scale, children learn that size and weight are different things. This helps them develop critical thinking skills and a better understanding of the physical world, which prepares them for more formal measuring in later school years.

Simple ways to play at home

You do not need special equipment to explore this. You can make a simple balance using a clothes hanger and two plastic cups tied to the ends. Try picking up two household items, like an apple and a cup, and ask your child which they think is heavier before placing them in the cups. Keep it light and playful. You can also let them feel objects in their hands, asking, 'Which one feels heavier?' This is a great way for children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English to engage with maths through touch and sight rather than just words.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they should start teaching their children how to read kilograms or grams. At this stage in Reception, the focus is on the language of comparison rather than exact numbers. The goal is for children to feel confident using words like 'heavier' and 'lighter'. Every school may approach this slightly

differently as part of their specific teaching plan, so if you are unsure what your child is currently learning, your child's teacher is the best person to ask for guidance.

Sources

- Department for Education: Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage
- GOV.UK: National curriculum in England: early years foundation stage