In Front, Behind or Beside? Teaching Positional Language in Reception

A gentle guide to helping your child in Reception learn positional language—words like 'behind', 'next to', and 'between'—through simple, playful activities at home.

What is positional language?

Positional language is the set of words we use to describe where something is in relation to something else. For children in Reception (the first year of primary school for most children), this means learning words such as 'in front of', 'behind', 'beside', 'above', 'below', and 'between'. These words help children describe the world around them and follow simple instructions. It is a key part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)—the framework that sets the standards for learning, development, and care for children from birth to five.

How children learn these words

In the early years, children learn best through play and exploration rather than formal lessons. They discover these concepts by moving their own bodies and handling objects. For example, they might crawl 'under' a table or stand 'next to' a friend. By experiencing these positions physically, they build a mental map of how space works. This hands-on approach helps them understand the meaning of the words before they are asked to use them in more structured ways as they move toward Year 1.

Why this matters for your child

Learning these words now provides a vital foundation for later learning in maths, specifically in areas called 'shape, space, and measure'. Being able to describe where an object is helps children develop their spatial awareness. This is specifically mentioned in the EYFS Early Learning Goals, which are the milestones children are expected to reach by the end of Reception. Whether they are describing a drawing or finding a hidden toy, these skills help them communicate more clearly and understand the world around them.

Simple ways to help at home

You can support your child with short, playful moments throughout the day. Try hiding a favourite toy and giving clues using positional words, such as 'It is behind the cushion'. While setting the table, you could ask them to put the spoon 'beside' the plate. On a walk, you might point out that a bird is 'above' a tree. These everyday activities are a wonderful way to build vocabulary without any pressure. Every child develops at their own pace, including those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they should be teaching their child to draw maps or use complex directions. At this stage, the focus is simply on the vocabulary of position. You do not need to worry about teaching 'left' and 'right' or complex turns yet, as these are different skills. If you are unsure which words your child is currently focusing on in class, your child's teacher is the best person to ask. They can tell you the specific goals your child is working towards in their school's setting.

Sources

- Department for Education: Statutory framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage
- GOV.UK: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Early Learning Goals