Longer or Shorter? Comparing Length Directly in Reception Maths

Reception children learn to compare the lengths of two objects by placing them next to each other, side by side. This simple skill—spotting which is longer or shorter—helps children notice how things can be different sizes and builds the maths they'll need later, like measuring with rulers.

What it is

Comparing length is about spotting whether one object is longer or shorter than another, just by looking at them carefully side by side. In Reception, children don't use rulers yet—they use direct comparison, which means placing two items next to each other to see their lengths. This teaches the words 'longer', 'shorter' and 'the same length as'. It's a bit like comparing two pencils to see which one is longer, or putting two ribbons next to each other to check if they're the same size. This skill is part of what mathematicians call 'measurement'—understanding how big things are.

What happens

In the classroom, your child might be given two pencils, two shoes or two pieces of ribbon and asked to place them next to each other to compare. The teacher will show them how to line up one end so they're starting from the same place—this is important, because if the pencils are at different starting points, they can't tell which is really longer. As children look, they spot the difference: one pencil sticks out further. The teacher uses the words 'longer', 'shorter' and 'the same length as', and your child learns to use them too. This activity might happen with many everyday objects—ribbons, sticks, toy cars—so children get plenty of practice spotting differences.

What it means for your child

Learning to compare lengths helps your child notice and describe the world around them in a mathematical way. They're building what teachers call 'spatial awareness'—understanding the space things take up. This skill also stops a common mix-up: children sometimes think an object is longer just because it's placed further away. By comparing side by side with one end lined up, your child learns the true difference in length. This skill isn't about being quick or clever—it's about careful looking and listening. It builds confidence with numbers and measuring, which they'll use more in Year 1 and beyond. Comparing length also connects to other maths they're already doing, like comparing weight and how much things hold.

How you can help at home

You can recreate this anywhere, anytime. Ask your child to compare lengths of everyday things: two spoons, two pieces of string, their pencil and yours, or two toy cars. Place them side by side with one end lined up and ask 'Which is longer?' or 'Are they the same length?' Let your child look carefully and answer. Use the words 'longer', 'shorter' and 'the same length as' as you talk. Keep it playful and short—just a minute or two is plenty. You don't need special materials: shoes, pieces of paper, sticks from the garden all work. The key is that your child is looking, comparing and using the language. There's no 'right way'—if they get it wrong, just line them up again and look together. This everyday practice strengthens what they're learning at school.

Questions parents often ask

Does my child need to be good at this before moving on? No. Comparing length is one small part of Reception maths. Some children pick it up quickly; others need more time. Both are normal. **Does this mean my child will be good at measuring?** Not yet. Direct comparison is the first step. Indirect comparison (using a third object to compare things far apart) and measuring with rulers come later in Year 1. **What if my child keeps making mistakes?** That's learning. Children often think a pencil placed further ahead is longer, even if it's not. Keep comparing side by side—this is how they learn. **Should I buy special equipment?** Not at all. Your kitchen, garden and toy box have everything you need.

Sources

- Department for Education: Early Learning Goals (Mathematics—Comparing sizes, quantities and objects)
- GOV.UK: Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (Mathematics area of learning and development)