More, Fewer or the Same? Comparing Groups Without Counting in Reception

A gentle guide to how children in Reception learn to compare groups of objects using 'more', 'fewer', and 'the same' through matching and pairing, rather than just counting.

What is comparing groups?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children begin to explore how quantities relate to one another. Before they move on to using numbers and symbols, they learn to compare groups of objects. This means looking at two sets of things—like a pile of buttons and a pile of toy cars—and figuring out which group has more or if they are the same. This is a key part of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage), which is the curriculum that sets the standards for learning, development, and care for children from birth to age five.

How children learn to compare

Instead of counting '1, 2, 3...', children use a method called one-to-one correspondence. This is a fancy way of saying they match one object from the first group to one object from the second group. They might line them up side-by-side or pair them up in couples. If one group has objects left over after every item in the other group has a partner, they can see that there are 'more' in that group. If nothing is left over, the groups are 'the same'. This visual approach helps them understand the concept of quantity before they rely on numerals.

Why this matters for your child

Learning to compare without counting builds a strong foundation for all future maths. It develops 'number sense', which is a child's fluid understanding of what numbers actually represent. By spotting that one group is 'fewer' (meaning there are not as many) than another, your child is preparing for later school work involving addition, subtraction, and the concepts of 'greater than' or 'less than'. This hands-on way of learning is inclusive and works well for all children, including those who are learning English or those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities).

Playful ideas for home

You can support your child with short, playful activities during your daily routine. At snack time, you could put a few apple slices on two different plates and ask, 'Which plate has more?' Encourage them to pair the slices up to find out. You could also use toy animals to see if there are enough chairs for every animal to have one, or match socks in the laundry to see if you have the same number of left and right socks. Keep it light and fun; there is no need for drilling or pressure.

Common questions

You might wonder why your child isn't just counting the objects. In the EYFS, it is important that children understand the physical meaning of 'more' and 'fewer' before they use numbers. This prevents them from just reciting a number sequence without understanding what it means. Every child develops at their own

pace, and some may find matching easier than others. If you have questions about how your child is progressing or the specific activities they are doing in class, your child's teacher is the best person to ask.

Sources

- Department for Education, Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage
- GOV.UK, National curriculum in England: early years foundation stage