Numicon Shapes: Why That Patterned Peg Board Helps Numbers Click in Reception

A gentle introduction to Numicon, the colourful shapes used in Reception to help children see and feel how numbers work.

What is Numicon?

Numicon is a set of colourful plastic shapes that many children use in Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5). Each shape represents a number from 1 to 10. Instead of just being a digit on a page, each number has its own unique shape with a pattern of holes. Because the shapes are consistent, children can start to recognise a number just by looking at it or feeling it, rather than having to count every single hole one by one.

How it works in the classroom

In school, children use these shapes to explore maths in a hands-on way. They might fit two shapes together to see how they make a larger number, which is a playful way to introduce addition. They also learn about 'odd' and 'even' numbers by looking at the 'feet' of the shapes; even numbers have a flat bottom, while odd numbers have a little chimney or 'peg' sticking up. This helps children visualise the patterns of numbers through touch and sight.

Why this helps your child

Using these shapes helps children move from counting objects to 'subitising'. Subitising is a school term for the ability to look at a small group of items and know how many there are without counting them individually. By seeing the fixed pattern of a Numicon shape, your child builds a stronger mental image of what a number actually 'looks' like. This creates a solid foundation for more complex maths as they move into Year 1.

Simple ideas for home

If your child brings Numicon shapes home, you can keep things light and playful. Try a 'mystery bag' game where they feel a shape without looking and guess the number. You could also find things around the house to fit into the holes, like buttons or dried pasta. There is no need for drilling or formal lessons; simply letting your child explore the shapes through play is enough. If you are unsure how your school uses them, your child's teacher will be happy to show you.

Common questions

Parents often ask if they need to buy their own set. While some families enjoy having them at home, it is not a requirement, and schools usually provide everything needed. You might also wonder if your child should be able to 'read' the shapes immediately. Every child learns at their own pace, including those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language. The goal is simply to make numbers feel friendly and visible.

Sources

- Department for Education: Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework
- GOV.UK: National curriculum in England: early years foundation stage