

Smaller, Smaller, Smallest: Comparing Size the Other Way Round in Reception

A gentle guide to helping your child in Reception learn how to compare sizes, focusing on using words like 'smaller' and 'smallest' to order objects.

What is comparing size?

In Reception (the first year of primary school for children aged 4 to 5), children begin learning basic maths through the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) framework. This is the set of standards that describes what children should be learning. A key part of this is learning how to describe the world around them. While many children find it easy to spot the 'biggest' item, it can be a bit trickier to think the other way round. Comparing size means looking at two or more objects and deciding which one is smaller or the smallest of the group.

How children learn to compare

Children usually start with direct comparison, which simply means putting two objects side by side to see which is smaller. As they progress, they might try indirect comparison. This is when they use a third object to help them. For example, if two toys are too far apart to touch, a child might use a piece of string to see which toy is shorter. In the classroom, your child will be encouraged to use specific words to describe these differences, helping them build a strong foundation for measurement later on.

What this means for your child

Learning these skills helps your child make sense of the physical world. It is not about getting 'right' answers in a test, but about developing their vocabulary and thinking skills. By focusing on 'smaller' and 'smallest', children learn to notice detail and order things logically. Because every child develops at their own pace, some may find this easier than others. If you are unsure how your child is getting on, your child's teacher is the best person to ask for an update.

Simple ways to help at home

You do not need any special equipment to practice this; you can use everyday items like shoes, spoons, or favourite toys. Try short, playful games during the day. While tidying up, you could ask, 'Which of these blocks is the smallest?' or 'Can you find a leaf that is smaller than this one?' Modelling the language is key. When you talk, use the words 'small', 'smaller', and 'smallest' clearly. Keep it light and fun, as children learn best through play and curiosity rather than formal drilling.

Common questions

Parents often wonder if they should be using rulers or measuring tapes. At this stage in Reception, the focus is on using language and visual comparison rather than using numbers or tools. You might also wonder if your child should be able to do this perfectly already. Remember that these are emerging skills; it is completely normal for children to occasionally mix up 'bigger' and 'smaller'. The goal is to build confidence and a love for exploring how things fit together.

Sources

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