

Subitising: Why Reception Children Should 'See' Small Numbers Without Counting

A gentle introduction to subitising, a key early maths skill where children learn to recognise small groups of objects instantly without needing to count them one by one.

What is subitising?

Subitising is a word used in the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage, the curriculum for children from birth to age 5) to describe the ability to look at a small group of items and know how many there are without counting them. For example, if you put three grapes on a plate, your child might just say 'three!' immediately, rather than pointing to each one and saying 'one, two, three'. It is a natural way of seeing numbers that helps children feel more confident with maths as they start school in Reception.

How it works

There are two main types of subitising. The first is 'perceptual', which is when a child sees a very small group (usually up to 4) and knows the amount instantly. The second is 'conceptual'. This is when a child sees a slightly larger group and breaks it into smaller parts they already know. For instance, they might see a group of 5 and instantly recognise it as a group of 2 and a group of 3, knowing that together they make 5. This helps them understand how numbers are put together.

Why it matters for your child

Being able to subitise is a wonderful building block for a child's 'number sense'. Instead of relying only on counting, which can sometimes be a mechanical process, subitising helps children truly understand the quantity of a number. This makes it easier for them to move on to more complex maths later on, such as adding and subtracting. Because every child develops at their own pace, some may find this easier than others; your child's teacher can tell you how they are getting on in class.

Simple ways to play at home

You can help your child practice in short, playful bursts during your daily routine. Try 'finger flashes', where you quickly show a few fingers and ask 'how many?' before hiding them. You can also use dice during board games or look at the dots on a ladybird or a dice-patterned card. Try asking, 'Can you see the 2 and the 1 that make 3?' while looking at a group of snacks. Keep it light and fun, as the goal is to build confidence through play rather than formal drilling.

Common questions

Parents often ask if subitising replaces counting. It doesn't; both skills are important. Counting one-by-one is a vital skill, but subitising adds another layer of understanding. You might also wonder if your child should be able to do this with large numbers. Usually, subitising focuses on very small groups (up to 5) because larger groups are too complex to 'see' all at once. If you have questions about the specific goals for your child's year group, your child's teacher is the best person to ask.



Sources

- Department for Education, Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework
- GOV.UK, National Curriculum in England: Early Years Foundation Stage