

Take Away or Find the Difference? Year 1's Two Meanings of Subtraction

A simple guide to help your child understand the two different ways we use subtraction in Year 1: taking things away and finding the difference between two groups.

What is subtraction?

Subtraction is a part of maths (the study of numbers and shapes) where we find out what is left or what the gap is between two numbers. In the early years, children usually start by learning 'take away'. This is when you have a group of objects and some of them disappear. However, subtraction also includes 'finding the difference'. This is when you have two separate groups and you want to see how many more are in one group than the other. Both are important for your child to feel confident with numbers as they move through school.

How children learn these two ways

In school, children often start with the 'take away' model because it is easy to see. For example, if you have five apples and eat two, they are gone. But they also need to learn the 'comparison' model. This is where two groups stay put, and we look at the gap between them. For instance, if one child has four stickers and another has six, we aren't taking any stickers away; we are just finding the difference. Because these two ideas feel different, some children find it tricky to know which one to use when they hear a story problem.

What this means for your child

Your child may be very good at subtracting when things are removed, but they might pause when asked 'how many more' one group has than another. This is a very common part of learning in Year 1. The National Curriculum (the official plan for what children should learn at each stage) expects pupils to use subtraction in different ways. If your child finds one way harder than the other, it is not a problem; they just need a bit more practice seeing subtraction as a way of comparing, not just removing.

Simple ways to help at home

You can help your child through short, playful moments. For 'take away', use snacks: 'You have five grapes, if you eat two, how many are left?' For 'finding the difference', line things up side by side. Put four spoons in one row and six in another. Ask, 'Which row is longer? How many more spoons does this row have?' Using real objects helps children see the difference between things disappearing and things being compared. Keep it light and fun; there is no need for drills or pressure.

Common questions

Parents often ask why their child can do a sum on paper but struggles with a word problem. This is usually because the child is trying to 'take away' when the problem is actually asking for the 'difference'. Every school may teach these methods slightly differently, so it is a great idea to ask your child's teacher which words or pictures they use in class. This ensures you are using the same language at home, which helps your child feel more secure and confident.

Sources

- Department for Education, National Curriculum in England: Mathematics programmes of study
- GOV.UK, National Curriculum