

Teens Numbers: What 'One More, One Less' Really Teaches

This guide explains a simple idea that helps Reception-age children make sense of the tricky 'teen' numbers (11 to 19): that each one is really 'ten and a bit more'. It looks at why these number names can confuse children at first, and offers easy, playful ways to help the idea click at home - no pressure, just everyday noticing and games.

What it is

In Reception (the first year of primary school in England, for children aged 4 to 5), children build on earlier work with numbers up to 10 by starting to explore numbers from 11 to 19 - often called the 'teen numbers'. The key idea is that every teen number is made up of one group of ten, plus a few more ones. So 13 is 'ten and three more', 17 is 'ten and seven more', and so on. This is sometimes called the structure of teen numbers, but your child won't need that phrase - they just need plenty of chances to see and feel ten-plus-a-bit through play. It follows naturally on from earlier number work, such as making 10 in different ways, and gives children an early, friendly introduction to how our number system is built.

What happens

At this stage, children usually meet teen numbers through hands-on, playful activities, not anything written down. This might include counting out a group of ten toys or buttons and then counting a few more alongside them, using a ten-frame (a simple frame with two rows of five boxes, used to show numbers clearly), songs, stories and games during child-led or adult-led play. Adults often use physical counters, fingers, or everyday objects so children can see ten held together as one group, with the extra ones laid out clearly next to it. Because English number words for the teens don't always match this structure in an obvious way, teachers tend to go slowly, returning to the ten-plus-more idea often and letting children explore it through talk, movement and play rather than rushing ahead. How this is taught can vary between schools and even between classes, so if you're curious about exactly what your child is doing, their teacher is the best person to ask.

What it means for your child

Many children briefly mix up or reverse teen numbers - for example, muddling 'thirteen' and 'thirty', or struggling to say which part comes first in 'four-teen'. This is a very common and completely normal part of learning, not a sign that anything is wrong. English number words for the teens don't follow an obvious pattern in the way some other languages do, which can make them trickier to learn purely by sound. Understanding that a teen number is 'ten and some more' gives children something solid to hold onto, beyond just memorising the words in order. With time, playful practice and plenty of patience, most children become confident with teen numbers. If your child is still finding this tricky later on, their teacher will be keeping an eye on it as part of everyday teaching, so there's no need to worry.

How you can help at home

You don't need any special equipment - everyday moments work well. When you have a group of more than ten of something (grapes, socks, toy cars), try counting out ten first and setting them together,

then counting the rest alongside and saying the total together, such as 'ten, and three more, that's thirteen'. Fingers work nicely too: wiggle all ten fingers for 'ten', then hold up a few more fingers (or ask a sibling or toy to lend some!) to show teen numbers. You could also play simple games, like hiding thirteen objects where a group of ten is already set aside in full view, and asking your child to work out how many are hidden altogether. Keep it short, playful and pressure-free - a couple of minutes while you're already doing something else is plenty. If your child enjoys it, follow their lead; if not, there's no need to push.

Questions parents often ask

Should my child be able to write teen numbers yet? Not necessarily - in Reception, the focus is usually on understanding and talking about numbers through play, with formal writing building up gradually; ask your child's teacher if you'd like to know where your child is with this. Is it a problem if my child still reverses teen number words? This is very common at this age and usually settles with time and practice - it's rarely a cause for concern on its own. Do I need special resources to help at home? No - everyday objects, fingers and conversation are enough; there's no need to buy anything special. Will this be tested? Government guidance doesn't set a formal written test on teen numbers at this stage; if you have questions about how your child's progress is checked, your child's teacher can explain what happens in their school.

Sources

- Department for Education, GOV.UK - 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage' (sets out the EYFS Mathematics Early Learning Goal, including understanding of numbers)
- Department for Education, GOV.UK - 'Development Matters: non-statutory curriculum guidance for the early years foundation stage'