The KS1 SATs Explained: A Parent's Plain-English Guide to Year 2 Tests

Many parents hear 'SATs' and worry before their child's Year 2 year is over. This guide explains, in plain English, what the Key Stage 1 (KS1) assessments in English reading and grammar, punctuation and spelling involve, how they differ from the Year 6 tests, and why many schools now run them in a low-key way. It is general information based on official guidance, not advice about your child. Schools can vary, so your child's teacher is always the best person to ask.

What it is

KS1 stands for Key Stage 1, the name the national curriculum gives to Years 1 and 2 of primary school in England. SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) is the older name people still use for national tests taken at the end of a key stage. For KS1 English, the tests cover reading, and grammar, punctuation and spelling (often shortened to 'GPS'). Writing is judged by your child's teacher rather than by a test paper, and maths is assessed in the same way. The Department for Education (DfE), the government department responsible for schools in England, decided in 2023 to make the KS1 tests non-statutory. 'Statutory' means required by law, so 'non-statutory' means schools are not required to run the tests. Teachers still assess each child at the end of Year 2 as part of normal school life. How a school uses the test materials is up to the school.

What happens

The English tests are short written papers. The reading paper uses a booklet of short texts with questions that ask your child to find information, work out meaning and show they understood what they read. The grammar, punctuation and spelling check has two parts: questions about grammar and punctuation, and a spelling task where the teacher reads words aloud for your child to write. The questions are usually simple, such as choosing the right word, adding a full stop, or spotting a missing capital letter. Papers are normally taken in a quiet classroom in short sessions, with instructions read aloud where needed. Many schools fit these into ordinary lessons, so they can feel like any other activity. The timing and format vary, and some schools may not use the papers at all, so ask your child's teacher what the plan is. Teacher judgements help the school see how each child is getting on and what to practise next.

What it means for your child

For most children, the main effect of the change is that the tests should feel less like exams. KS1 results are not published in school performance tables, which are the official comparisons between schools, so they are not used to rank your child's school against others. Their main purpose is to help teachers see what your child can already do and what they might work on next, such as sounding out longer words or using capital letters consistently. Every child develops at their own pace. Some children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or those learning English as an additional language, may find some questions harder or need instructions explained in a different way. Your child's teacher can explain what support is available. Feeling settled and confident at school matters far more at this age than any single piece of work.

How you can help at home

The best support is relaxed and playful. Read together every day, whatever the book: comics, recipe books, shop signs or a story you make up together. Ask questions as you go, such as 'What do you think will happen next?' or 'Why do you think she felt sad?' Spelling and punctuation can come up naturally. Your child could spot capital letters on a sign, add full stops to a shopping list, or help write a short note to a relative. Keep sessions short, perhaps around ten minutes, and finish on a good note. If your child speaks another language at home, talking and reading in that language is valuable too, and your child's teacher can suggest ways to bring both languages together. Avoid timed drilling or practice papers unless the school asks for them, as these can make children anxious. Praise effort and enjoyment, not just right answers.

Questions parents often ask

Do I need to explain the tests to my child? Most parents find it helps to describe them simply, as a chance to show what they know, and to keep the mood light. Is my child going to pass or fail? KS1 tests are not pass or fail exams. Will the results be shared? KS1 results are not published in school performance tables. The school does record how your child is getting on, and this is usually shared with you in their end-of-year report. What if my child finds it hard? Finding some questions tricky is normal and part of learning. If you have concerns, arrange a chat with the teacher. Can I see the papers? The school decides what it shares about how it uses the papers, so ask your child's teacher. The official rules are set out on GOV.UK, and your child's teacher is the best first point of contact for anything specific to your child.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'Assessment and reporting arrangements (ARA): key stage 1 and 2', GOV.UK (updated each year)
- Department for Education, 'National curriculum in England: English programmes of study', GOV.UK
- Department for Education, 'National curriculum in England: framework for key stages 1 to 4', GOV.UK