

1st, 2nd, 3rd: Making Sense of Ordinal Numbers in Year 1

A simple guide to help your child understand ordinal numbers—words like first, second, and third—and how they differ from regular counting numbers.

What are ordinal numbers?

In Year 1 (the first year of primary school for children aged 5 to 6), children learn about two different types of numbers. There are counting numbers, which tell us 'how many' (one, two, three), and ordinal numbers, which tell us the 'position' or 'order' of something (first, second, third). While counting numbers help us find a total, ordinal numbers help us describe where something is in a sequence. For example, if three children are waiting for the bus, we can say there are 'three children' in total, but we can also say one child is 'first' in the queue.

What happens in the classroom?

During maths lessons, children practice using this vocabulary to describe the world around them. They might look at a row of colourful blocks and identify which one is second from the left, or talk about who finished a race in third place. Because ordinal numbers sound similar to counting numbers, it is very common for children to mix them up at first. Your child's teacher will use visual aids and practical activities to help them see the difference between the number of items and the position of a specific item.

What this means for your child

Learning ordinal numbers is a key part of developing 'positional language'. This helps your child follow instructions more accurately and describe things more clearly. For some children, especially those learning English as an additional language or children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), these words can feel a bit tricky because they don't always follow a simple pattern. Please remember that every child progresses at their own pace; if your child is still confusing 'three' with 'third', this is a normal part of their learning journey in Year 1.

Simple ways to help at home

You don't need any special equipment to practice this; you can find ordinal numbers everywhere in your daily routine. Try turning it into a game: when you are tidying up, ask who can be the 'first' to put their shoes away. While reading a story, ask which character is 'second' in a picture. You can also use a calendar to look at the dates, pointing out the 'first' of the month. Keep these moments short, playful, and stress-free. If you would like more specific ideas, your child's teacher can suggest activities that match what they are doing in class.

Common questions

Parents often ask why their child can count to twenty but still struggles with 'first' or 'second'. This is because counting is a repetitive skill, whereas ordinal numbers require a different way of thinking about the order of things. You might also wonder if you should use worksheets at home. While some find them helpful, the Department for Education's approach emphasizes practical, hands-on learning for this age.

group. The most helpful thing you can do is simply use the words 'first', 'second', and 'third' naturally during your day.

Sources

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