Before, After and Between: Ordering Numbers to 20 in Year 1

In Year 1, children learn to put numbers from 1 to 20 in order and identify which number comes immediately before, after or between any given number. They use number tracks—lines showing numbers in sequence—to help them see where each number sits. This foundational skill helps children move beyond just reciting numbers to truly understanding how numbers relate to each other, which is essential for later work with number lines, addition, subtraction and mental maths.

What it is

"Before, after and between" means understanding the position and sequence of numbers, not just counting them. A number track is a visual line showing numbers in order, usually 1 to 20, which helps children see where each number sits. When a child can say that 7 comes after 6 and before 8, they're understanding that numbers have fixed positions and relationships to each other. This is different from simply counting from 1 to 20, which many children can do without fully grasping order or how numbers relate to one another. By developing this understanding, children begin to see numbers as part of a whole system rather than isolated facts to remember.

What happens in school

In Year 1, your child's teacher will use number tracks and number lines regularly throughout the year to build this understanding. They might cover up a number and ask what's missing, or play games where children themselves stand on a human number line. Teachers use concrete objects like blocks or counters to show how numbers relate to each other. They read simple number stories and ask children to point to where numbers go. Your child will play games like "I spy a number" and use number tracks to find missing numbers. Teachers check understanding by asking children to show numbers in order or tell them what comes before or after a number. This isn't taught once—children need repeated, playful practice over many weeks for the learning to stick.

What it means for your child

This skill is a stepping stone to much bigger things. Once children truly understand that numbers have a position and sequence, they can start using number lines for addition and subtraction. They'll move from just "counting on"—saying 1, 2, 3 every time—to knowing instantly that 7 is 1 more than 6. Children who grasp before, after and between early often find mental maths easier later. This doesn't happen overnight; children develop at their own pace. Some Year 1 children will be secure quickly, others need more time. Both are completely normal. What matters is that your child is developing number sense—understanding that numbers are connected, ordered and related to each other, rather than seeing them as isolated facts to memorise.

How you can help at home

Number tracks are everywhere in everyday life. Point them out: door numbers on your street, pages in a book, numbers on a ruler or measuring tape. Play simple games: ask "What number comes after 7?" or "What's between 5 and 7?" Sing or chant number rhymes together—children love rhythm and it helps them remember sequences. Cover up a number on a ruler and ask what's hidden. Play board games or card games that use number tracks. When cooking, point out numbered steps or timing. The key is

keeping it playful and short—five minutes of fun beats twenty minutes of formal practice. Don't worry if your child uses their fingers or the number track to help them think; that's exactly what these tools are for. Over time, with playful repetition, your child will need these supports less and less.

Questions parents often ask

Is it a problem if my child counts on using their fingers? No—using fingers, the number track or other thinking tools is exactly what they should do. It's not a weakness; it's how children learn. They gradually need less help as they practise and remember more. **Should I use flashcards to drill this at home?** Brief, playful practice is much better than flashcards or drills. If your child seems stressed or frustrated, stop. A short game beats a long test. **My child knows the sequence but can't find a number on the actual track.** That's very common—remembering the order and spotting where a number lives are different skills that take time to connect. Using the track often helps both develop together. **My child seems behind other children.** Children develop at different speeds, and this matters much less than it feels right now. Talk to your child's teacher if you're concerned; they can tell you exactly where your child is and what helps.

Sources

- National Curriculum in England: Mathematics Programmes of Study (Key Stage 1)
- Department for Education: Key Stage 1 Assessment Guidance