Using Number Lines to Add and Take Away: A Year 1 Guide for Home

Key points

- A number line is simply a line with numbers in order, and it helps children see addition and subtraction as a journey of jumps forwards and backwards.
- Counting on (starting from the bigger number and jumping forwards) is quicker than counting from one, especially for addition.
- Subtraction can be shown as counting back along the same number line, which helps children understand that both operations use the same tool.
- Year 1 children need to see number lines drawn or marked out (with fingers, hops or jumps) to build a clear mental picture.
- Regular, short practice with a physical number line—drawn on paper, made with steps, or marked with stones—helps children work faster and more confidently.

Things to try at home

- Draw a simple number line (0 to 10 or 0 to 20) on paper and use your finger or a toy to hop forwards to add or backwards to take away.
- Use stones, sticks or toys arranged in a line and walk or hop along them to show adding or taking away—it brings the number line to life.
- Ask questions like "If you have 3 sweets and I give you 2 more, how many do you have?" and let your child count on from 3 using fingers or hops, with no need to rush.
- When cooking, playing games or looking at a ruler, point and trace along the numbers to show the idea of moving along a line—it all counts as practice.
- Play "forwards and backwards": count along the number line in both directions just for fun, with no pressure to be quick or correct.

Find out more

- The National Curriculum for England, Key Stage 1 maths, sets out the expectation that pupils use addition and subtraction with a range of objects, pictures and number lines (available on GOV.UK).
- Ask your child's teacher which number line methods and resources they use in class, and they may be happy to show you how they teach it.
- The DfE's non-statutory guidance and exemplification materials for the National Curriculum (free on GOV.UK) show number lines in use across Year 1 maths lessons.