Greater Than, Less Than or Equal? Making Sense of <, > and = in Year 2 Maths

Key points

- In Year 2, children learn to compare two-digit numbers and use three symbols to show what they've found: < (less than), > (greater than), and = (equal to).
- The 'hungry crocodile' or 'alligator mouth' trick helps some children, but others find it confusing because they have to remember which way the mouth opens.
- A clearer way to think about these symbols is as a pointer or 'arrow' that always points towards or 'eats' the smaller number.
- It's completely normal for children to reverse these symbols at first—they're learning abstract ideas about quantity, and mistakes are part of that.
- Comparing numbers makes more sense to children when they see them in real life, like comparing ages, scores or amounts.

Things to try at home

- Compare simple numbers together without any symbols: 'You're 7, your brother is 5, so 7 is bigger'—just chat about it naturally.
- Play a 'bigger or smaller' game with dice, playing cards or dominoes: pick two numbers and ask 'which one wins?' to get your child thinking before you add the symbols.
- Point out numbers on packages, clocks or in books, and ask casually which is bigger—no pressure, just noticing.
- Use objects like pennies, toys or snacks to show why 23 is more than 18: let your child count and see with their own eyes.
- Praise how your child thinks, not just whether they're fast: 'You worked that out!' or 'I like how you checked that' helps them feel confident.

Find out more

- National Curriculum for mathematics (Key Stage 1)—sets out what Year 2 pupils should be able to do with comparing and ordering numbers.
- GOV.UK: 'What your child learns in Year 2'—the official outline of the Year 2 curriculum.
- Your child's teacher—they know which approach the school uses and can suggest games or activities that match what's happening in class.