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

In Year 2, children learn to compare numbers using three symbols: < (less than), > (greater than) and = (equal to). This guide explains what these symbols mean, why children sometimes muddle them up, and how you can help your child practise at home using everyday situations and playful activities.

What it is

The symbols <, > and = are shortcuts that help us compare numbers. The = symbol means the numbers are the same (equal). The < and > symbols tell us which number is bigger and which is smaller. For example, 23 < 47 means 23 is less than 47, and 52 > 19 means 52 is greater than 19. In Year 2, children learn to compare two-digit numbers (numbers from 10 to 100) using these symbols. It's part of the National Curriculum requirement that Year 2 pupils can compare and order numbers using <, > and = signs. This skill helps children understand how numbers relate to each other and builds their sense of what numbers mean, not just what they look like.

What happens

Many schools use the 'hungry crocodile' or 'alligator mouth' trick to help children remember which way the symbols point. The idea is that the crocodile's mouth opens towards the bigger number because it's greedy. However, this method sometimes backfires and confuses children about which number is which. A clearer approach is to remember that both < and > point to the smaller number, like an arrow. Another way to think about it: the symbol always opens towards the bigger number. Children learn by comparing numbers on a number line, in games, and through practical activities. Teachers often use a mix of methods so children find the one that makes sense to them. Getting mixed up is completely normal at first—children's brains are still learning how to match symbols to ideas.

What it means for your child

When your child can compare numbers using <, > and =, it shows they understand that numbers have size and value. They're not just reciting a sequence—they genuinely grasp that 34 is smaller than 58, and why. This is a big step in mathematical thinking. It means your child is developing their sense of place value (understanding that the tens digit matters more than the ones digit) and building foundations for later topics like ordering numbers, working with tens and ones, and eventually addition and subtraction with understanding. Children develop this skill at different speeds, and many muddle the symbols for a while. This is part of the learning process and not a cause for worry. Every time your child practises, their brain makes the connections stronger.

How you can help at home

The best way to help is through everyday talk and play, not drilling. When you're out, notice bigger and smaller things: 'Your brother is 8 and you're 6—who's older?' or 'This toy costs £12 and that one costs £8—which is more expensive?' Compare ages, heights, pocket money, or toy collections in a playful way. You can also play simple number games: lay out two cards and ask 'which number is bigger?' or use the symbols to record who won more points in a game. If your child muddled the symbols, gently remind them which one they need without making a fuss. Keep it relaxed and short—a minute or two is enough. A

printable worksheet with pictures can be fun for a few minutes once or twice a week, but everyday chat is much more powerful than worksheets alone.

Questions parents often ask

Why do children reverse the signs? The symbols are abstract—there's no real-world reason why < looks like it does, so it's easy to mix up. Children's brains are still wiring up these connections. **Is it normal?** Absolutely. Most Year 2 children muddle them at some point, and many still do in Year 3. **When should they know these?** By the end of Year 2, children are expected to compare numbers using the symbols, but this doesn't mean perfection. **Do they need to remember the crocodile trick?** No. Different methods work for different children. Some prefer 'the symbol points to the smaller number' or simply practising lots of examples. **Should I correct them every time?** Not every time—it creates pressure. A gentle reminder sometimes, and lots of low-pressure practice, works best.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'Key Stage 1: Mathematics', National Curriculum (2014)
- GOV.UK, 'National curriculum in England: mathematics programmes of study' (Key Stage 1)