Guess, Then Check: Teaching Estimation of Larger Quantities in Year 1 Maths

A gentle guide to estimation in Year 1 maths, explaining how children learn to make a 'smart guess' about how many objects are in a group before counting them to find the real answer.

What is estimation?

Estimation is when your child makes a sensible guess about the number of objects in a group without counting them one by one. In Year 1 (children aged 5 to 6), this is a key part of the National Curriculum for maths. It is different from 'subitising', which is a skill children learn in Reception (the year before Year 1) where they can instantly see a very small number of items, like three apples, without counting. Estimation is for larger groups where they can't see the exact number immediately, but can guess 'roughly how many' are there.

What happens in the classroom?

Your child's teacher will use a 'guess, then check' approach. They might show the class a jar of buttons, a handful of counters, or dots on a page. The children are encouraged to look at the group and make an estimate. After guessing, they count the objects to see how close they were. To help them, teachers might show them a 'benchmark'—a small group of 5 or 10 objects—so the children can compare the unknown group to one they already know. Some children might also try grouping the objects into smaller bunches before guessing.

Why is this important for your child?

Learning to estimate helps children develop a 'feel' for numbers. It teaches them that maths isn't just about being exactly right every time, but about making reasonable predictions. It also acts as a safety net for their counting; if a child estimates that there are about 10 sweets in a bowl but then counts 50, they will realise they have likely made a mistake in their counting. This builds their confidence and helps them spot errors independently. Every child learns at their own pace, including those with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) or those learning English as an additional language.

Simple ways to help at home

You don't need any special equipment to practice this. Try turning everyday moments into short, playful games. While shopping, you could ask, 'How many apples do you think are in this bag? Let's guess, then check!' or 'How many pasta shells are in your hand?'. Keep it light and fun; there is no need for drilling or pressure. The goal is simply to encourage them to look at a quantity and make a guess. If you are unsure how your child is progressing, your child's teacher is the best person to ask for a quick update.

Common questions

Parents often ask if their child needs to be 'accurate' when guessing. The answer is no; the point of estimation is not to be exactly right, but to be 'in the ballpark'. Another common question is whether this is the same as counting. It isn't—counting is finding the exact total, while estimation is about finding a

reasonable approximation. If your child finds this tricky, remember that it is a skill that develops over time through play and exploration. Just keep it positive and encouraging.

Sources

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