Position and Direction: Giving Clear Turn Instructions in Year 1 Maths

In Year 1, children learn to describe where things are and how they move using precise language: left, right, above, below, between, next to, and turns (whole, half and three-quarter). They often practise with programmable toys or floor robots. Learning to give clear, exact directions builds communication skills and spatial awareness—everyday abilities that matter far beyond maths.

What it is

Position and direction is the part of Year 1 maths where children learn the language to describe where things are and how they move. The vocabulary includes 'left' and 'right', 'above' and 'below', 'between' and 'next to'. Children also learn about turns: a 'whole turn' (all the way round), a 'half turn' (facing the opposite way), and a 'three-quarter turn'. The key idea is being precise. Saying 'a quarter turn right' is exact and means the same thing to everyone. Vague words like 'a bit' or 'over there' don't work when you need to give someone clear instructions. That precision matters in everyday life—giving directions, describing where something is, or explaining how to move.

What happens

In class, children often learn through play and movement. They might use programmable toys or floor robots—small devices that follow step-by-step instructions to move around a mat or the classroom floor. Children give instructions like 'forward 2 steps, turn right, forward 1 step', then watch to see if the toy goes where they meant. They also play games where they describe positions ('Put the teddy above the table') or give each other turn-by-turn directions. Sometimes they act it out themselves, practising left and right turns and describing where they are standing. This hands-on, playful approach helps the ideas stick much better than worksheets alone. Your child's teacher may vary the activities depending on what works best for the class.

What it means for your child

Learning to be precise with language is a life skill. When your child can say 'turn right' and mean it clearly, they're learning to think exactly and to communicate in a way others can follow. Spatial awareness—understanding where things are and how to move through space—develops gradually and matters for everything from sports to reading a map to tidying a bedroom. Following step-by-step instructions builds problem-solving skills: if the robot doesn't go where you expected, you work out what went wrong and try again. This quiet resilience—noticing, adjusting, trying once more—is hugely valuable. It also builds confidence: mastering the language of position and direction shows children they can learn something new and explain it to others.

How you can help at home

You do not need special equipment. Simple, playful activities work best. Give your child turn-by-turn directions around the house: 'Go to the kitchen, turn left at the door, stop at the table.' Let them give you directions and follow them carefully (even if they lead somewhere silly—the playfulness matters). Play treasure hunts: 'Look for something between the sofa and the window' or 'Find a toy above the shelf.' Describe what you see during everyday moments: 'Your shoes are next to the door' or 'The cat is below the table.' If you have a toy robot or a simple programmable toy, use it together—give instructions and see

if it lands where you meant. Keep it short, warm and fun. There is no need to drill or test. Children learn fastest through play and without pressure.

Questions parents often ask

Is this just learning left and right? No. It is a whole toolkit of language: above, below, between, next to, and turns. Some children take longer to grasp left and right, and that is completely normal. It develops at different ages; there is no rush. **Should I practise with my child?** Light, playful practice helps. A five-minute game of treasure hunt or giving directions is far better than sitting down to 'practise'. **What if my child finds it tricky?** Spatial awareness develops gradually. Some children grasp it quickly; others need more time. Using real objects and movement (not just pictures) helps. If you are worried, chat with your child's teacher—they will have strategies tailored to your child. **Do I need to use the exact words?** It helps if you use the right language ('left', not 'that side'), but the key is to keep it natural. Your child will pick it up through hearing it used.

Sources

- Department for Education, National Curriculum in England: Mathematics Programmes of Study (Key Stage 1)
- GOV.UK, Primary National Curriculum