

Tally Marks Explained: Why We Count in Fives for Year 2 Data

Tally marks are a simple way of keeping count as things happen, using short strokes grouped in fives so they're quick to add up at a glance. In Year 2 (ages 6 to 7), children meet tally charts as their first step into 'statistics' — the National Curriculum term for collecting, organising and reading information. This guide explains what tally marks are, why we group them in fives, how they lead on to pictograms and block diagrams, and some easy, playful ways to practise at home.

What tally marks are

A tally mark is a short line used to count something, with one line added each time an item is counted. Four single marks are drawn upright (| | | |), and the fifth is drawn diagonally across the first four, making a neat bundle of five. The next tally starts a fresh group next to it. This 'bundling in fives' is simply a counting convention — a shared way of doing something that people have agreed on, a bit like always reading a clock face the same way. It means that instead of counting lots of single marks one by one, your child can count the bundles of five and then add on any leftover single marks, for example 'five, ten, fifteen, and two more is seventeen.' In Year 2, tally charts are usually introduced through everyday counting activities, such as tallying how many children chose a particular fruit, colour or pet, so the idea feels practical rather than abstract.

What happens in class

In Year 2, tally charts form part of the 'statistics' strand of the National Curriculum for England, which is about collecting, sorting and making sense of information. A teacher might ask the class a question — such as 'What's your favourite fruit?' — and as each child answers, a tally mark is added next to that fruit's name. Once everyone has answered, the class counts the groups of five and any extra marks to find the total for each category. From there, children usually move on to showing the same information in other ways, such as a pictogram (where pictures or symbols represent the amounts) or a simple block diagram or block graph (where coloured blocks or squares are stacked to show quantities). Seeing the same data presented as tally marks, then as pictures, then as blocks helps children understand that there are different ways to show the same information, and that some are quicker to read than others.

What it means for your child

Learning to use tally marks helps your child build several maths skills at once: careful one-to-one counting, grouping in fives (which also supports their growing understanding of the five and ten times tables), and simple addition when totalling the groups. It also introduces the idea that information can be collected and organised to answer a question, which is the heart of statistics. Many children find tally charts satisfying because the fives bundle makes counting large amounts feel manageable rather than overwhelming — they're not expected to count every single mark one at a time. If your child is still getting used to the idea, that's completely normal at this stage; the fives-grouping convention and the move from tally chart to pictogram to block diagram are all new ideas being introduced together. Every school paces this slightly differently, so if you're ever unsure exactly what your child has covered or what's coming next, it's always worth asking their class teacher.

How you can help at home



You don't need any special resources — just paper and a pencil, or even twigs or buttons arranged in fives. Try a quick, playful tally together: count how many red cars you spot on a short walk, how many times someone says a particular word during a TV programme, or what the weather is like each day for a week. Let your child make the marks themselves, bundling the fifth one diagonally across the first four. Afterwards, ask them to 'read back' the chart to you — for example, 'How many blue cars were there? Were there more red or more blue?' This mirrors exactly what happens in the Year 2 classroom and keeps things light and curiosity-led rather than feeling like extra homework. If your child enjoys it, you could turn the same tally into a simple drawing with one picture per item counted, which is a gentle, hands-on introduction to pictograms.

Questions parents often ask

Why fives and not another number? Grouping in fives makes counting quick because most people can recognise a bundle of five at a glance, and it connects neatly to counting in fives, which children are also learning around this age. Does my child need to memorise the tally symbol? No — the aim is for them to use and read tally marks confidently, not to recite a definition. What if my child mixes up the fifth mark? This is a common and normal early mistake; gently showing the diagonal line across the four uprights usually sorts it out with a little practice. Is this the same as a pictogram? No — a tally chart uses marks to count as data comes in, while a pictogram uses pictures or symbols afterwards to display the totals. If you'd like to know exactly how your child's school is teaching this, their class teacher will be able to tell you, since the order and pace can vary between schools.

Sources

- Department for Education, 'National curriculum in England: mathematics programmes of study' (GOV.UK) — Key Stage 1, Year 2 statistics section