Telling the Time: Why the Hour Hand Tells the Story

Key points

- The minute hand points to 12 when it's o'clock — and points to 6 when it's half past; that's the only thing that changes between them.
- The hour hand is the one that moves slowly and tells you which hour you're in; it creeps from one number to the next as the minutes pass.
- At o'clock, the hour hand points exactly at the number (like 3 o'clock, the hour hand points at 3).
- At half past, the hour hand is halfway between two numbers — it's been creeping towards the next hour for thirty minutes (so at half past 3, it's halfway between 3 and 4).
- 'O'clock' and 'half past' aren't magic labels to memorise; they're descriptions of where the hour hand actually is.
- Children don't need to know why the hands move this way yet — just what they're pointing at and what it means.

Things to try at home

- At mealtimes and bedtime, draw a simple clock face (just a circle with 12 at the top, 3 on the right, 6 at the bottom, 9 on the left) and show where the hands are right now — no pressure to get it 'right', just sketch it together and say the time out loud.
- When you tell your child the time during the day ('It's half past four'), point to both hands on a real clock or your watch so they see where each one is — this link between the words and the position is what sticks.
- Notice the hour hand together: 'Look, the hour hand is slowly creeping from the 7 towards the 8 — that means we're between 7 and 8 o'clock right now.'
- Draw two clock faces — one showing o'clock (hour hand pointing exactly at a number, minute hand at 12) and one showing half past the same hour (hour hand halfway to the next number, minute hand at 6) — and let them spot the difference.
- Ask 'Where's the hour hand now?' at different times of day; the goal is noticing it moves gradually, not jumping suddenly from one hour to the next.

Find out more

- Your child's Year 1 teacher or school — they can show you what children are learning about telling the time in class and suggest what helps most at home.
- National Curriculum guidance for Key Stage 1 (available on the Department for Education website) sets out that Year 1 pupils should tell the time to the hour and half past the hour.
- Analogue clocks are still taught in English schools because they show time as movement; if your child finds them tricky, short daily practice at real moments (not worksheets alone) makes it click.