

Tricky Tens: Making 11-20 with a Ten and Some Ones

Around Reception and Year 1, children start to see numbers like 13 or 17 not just as a point in the counting sequence, but as 'ten and a few more'. This guide explains why that shift matters, what it looks like in the classroom, and a simple everyday activity you can try at home using things like buttons, pasta or toy bricks.

What it is

This is about how children come to understand numbers from 11 to 20 — sometimes called 'teen numbers' — not just as names in a counting sequence, but as a ten plus some extra ones. For example, seeing 14 as 'a group of ten and four more' rather than just the number that comes after 13. This is an early step towards understanding place value, which is the idea that where a digit sits in a number changes what it's worth (so the '1' in 14 means one ten, not one). Schools build this understanding slowly, using pictures and hands-on objects rather than asking children to simply memorise the order of numbers. It's a small shift in thinking, but it's one of the building blocks for all the maths that follows in primary school, including addition, subtraction and later work with bigger numbers.

What happens

In Reception and Year 1 classrooms, teachers often use particular tools to help children picture 'ten and some more'. A bead string is a string of beads, usually grouped in tens by colour, that children can count along and bundle into tens. A ten-frame is a simple grid of ten boxes, arranged in two rows of five, that children fill with counters or dots so they can see at a glance whether they have 'a full ten' plus extra. A part-whole diagram is a simple drawing that splits a number into its parts — for instance, showing 16 as 10 and 6 joined together. Children might also build teen numbers with physical objects, filling one ten-frame completely and then adding loose counters alongside it. The aim is for children to see and feel the structure of the number, not just recite it.

What it means for your child

Many children find this stage genuinely tricky, and that's completely normal — it's not a sign that something is wrong. English number words don't always make the 'ten and some more' structure obvious: 'fourteen' doesn't obviously sound like 'ten and four' in the way some other languages' number words do, so children have to build that understanding through pictures and practical objects rather than just the word itself. Getting comfortable with this idea matters because it underpins place value for the rest of primary school — later work with bigger numbers, adding and subtracting, and even measurement and money all rest on children trusting that a '1' can mean 'one ten'. If your child seems to count confidently to 20 but still looks puzzled when asked 'how many tens and ones in 15?', that's a sign they're still building this understanding, not falling behind.

How you can help at home

You don't need any teaching background for this — short, playful moments work best. Gather any small everyday objects: buttons, dried pasta, toy bricks or coins all work well. Count out ten objects together and pop them into an egg carton, a muffin tray, or simply line them up in a row of ten. Then

add a few more objects next to the group of ten and ask, 'how many are there altogether?' or 'can you show me the ten, and then the extra ones?' You could do this while tidying up toys, setting the table, or during a few minutes before bedtime. There's no need for worksheets or repeated drilling — a couple of minutes, now and then, following your child's interest, is plenty. If you're ever unsure what approach matches what your child is doing in class, their teacher is always the best person to ask, since methods can vary a little between schools.

Questions parents often ask

My child can count to 20 but still gets stuck on teen numbers — is that normal? Yes, this is a very common stage, and it usually settles with time and practice rather than worry. Should I use flashcards or timed drills? These aren't necessary and official guidance favours hands-on, visual approaches over rote memorisation or pressure — gentle, playful practice works better. My child has SEND, or is still learning English — will this be harder? Every child progresses differently, and schools can adapt their approach; if you have concerns, your child's teacher or the school's SEND coordinator (a staff member who supports children with additional needs) is the right person to talk to. Is this taught the same way in every school? The exact tools and pace can vary by school, so if you'd like to know exactly how it's being taught to your child, it's always worth asking their teacher directly.

Sources

- Department for Education (GOV.UK) — 'Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage'
- Department for Education (GOV.UK) — 'National curriculum in England: mathematics programmes of study'
- Department for Education (GOV.UK) — 'Mathematics guidance: key stages 1 and 2 (non-statutory)'