



18 months *to* 36 months

NUMBER SENSE

How are children learning about numbers?

Introduction

What are young children learning about numbers?

Young children begin to practice the skills needed for arithmetic and math long before they enter elementary school. Most of these skills are developed through their self-initiated play with materials and through simple interactions with adults.

- Young children begin to learn counting skills through everyday interactions such as putting plates on the table, counting their fingers to tell you how old they are, or counting the number of crackers on the plate.
- Children between 19 and 36 months are beginning to count things. They usually learn how to say “1-2-3-4-5” (sometimes putting the numbers in different order) before they know that each number represents something. They may count their pieces of broccoli up to 3 or 4, but they might count the same piece twice or miss a piece. They are still learning the sequence of numbers and might miss a number, for example, “1-2-4.”
- They can hold up two fingers to show you how old they are and they can hand you two tissues when you ask them to.
- They are beginning to use the terms “a little bit” and “a lot.” When you ask if they want a little yogurt or a lot, they can choose.
- They may also use their fingers for counting.



Tips for families to help children in understanding numbers:

Many of the things that families do naturally with children help them to develop their math and number skills. There are many opportunities in our everyday lives where adults are counting things and children are practicing numbers in their play. Here are some suggestions of things families can do:

- Count out loud, so your children can hear the sequence of numbers and notice how often you use counting in your day. When children learn from you how numbers are useful in everyday life, their interest in numbers grows.

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- Count the hugs you give your child, count the flowers that your child picks, or count the number of claps you and your child make.
- Help children count things as they put the carrot pieces on their plate, or as they collect sea shells. Count things in front of children: "I'm going to give you 4 pieces of apple—1, 2, 3, 4."
- When there are two piles of blocks—one with three and one with four blocks—you can ask your child, "Do you want the bigger or the smaller pile of blocks?" or, "Do you want three blocks or four blocks?"
- Point to things as you count them so that children can see how each number you say represents one object.
- Children will make lots of mistakes when they are learning about numbers. Without saying that they are "wrong," you can gently suggest that we count again together. Or you can say, "You counted four birds and I only see three." Children are naturally interested in imitating you to learn about things like numbers. Over time, they will say things the way you do and "self-correct" to be more like you.

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- Shopping, cooking and eating provide many opportunities for counting:
 - “Shall we get 2 tangerines or 3? Can you count them for me as I put them in the bag?”
 - “I think I’ll get the big bag of potatoes, because you love potatoes.”
 - “Can you put all the tangerines in this bowl and all the apples in this bowl?”
 - “I need to have 2 potatoes washed. Can you get them out of the refrigerator and scrub them in the sink?”

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