A parent's guide to...

position

Learning about position involves fun, physical activities and will get you and your child out and about, explains *Juliet Robertson*

Position is about the relationship of one person or object to another – the toys are in the box; the books are on the shelf; the ball is under the table, and so on. Its link to maths may not be immediately obvious, but a child needs to understand position if they are to learn many aspects of mathematics, including counting.

Position also relates to movement, direction of travel and the ability to give and follow directions. This makes it a very practical aspect of maths and one that children can develop by getting out and about.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

When learning to count, a child needs to understand the position of each number in relation to the others. For example, they have to learn that the number before five is four, or that the number eight is in between seven and nine.

As children grow, they develop a greater awareness of what they can do with their bodies and where their bodies are in relation to other objects and people. This is the beginning of geometry, which is concerned with shape, space and the relative position of figures.

Maths can be linked to physical play

All these elements of maths have clear links to physical play, so to help your child develop their awareness of position, movement and direction, let them climb, run and move in different ways.

Getting out and about, recognising landmarks and knowing how to get to the shops, park or other local places are invaluable for helping your child get to know their area and understand position on a large scale.

VOCABULARY

Your child will need plenty of time to hear, remember and use positional words such as: above, backwards, behind, below, beside, close, compass, curved, direction, down, east, far, forwards, here, high, horizontal, in, between, in front of, inside, inside out, left, line, low, near, next, north, on top, out, outside, over, position, right, route, south, straight, there, through, turn, under, underneath, up, upside down, vertical, west.

Modelling the words

Incorporate as many of the words as you can in your daily life as well as in activities with your child. From hearing and watching others model these words, your child will move on to following instructions, carrying out tasks that require positional knowledge and using the words themselves.

Many routines by their nature include directions and instructions and help children use and learn the vocabulary. Start with one-part directions such as, 'The yogurt is inside the fridge.' Next, move on to two-part directions, such as, 'You will find a yogurt inside the fridge and a spoon on the table.'

ACTIVITIES

Adapt well-known games

Tweak games to open up opportunities for children to hear and use words and phrases associated with position. Take turns with your child, so they develop their confidence at following and giving instructions:

Hide 'n' Seek Count slowly to 10 while your child hides, inside or out. When you start looking, talk aloud about where your child might be – for example, 'I wonder if Anna is behind the tree. Maybe she is near the litter bin. Yes!'

Hunt the Teddy Hide a teddy or favourite toy, then give clues to help your child to find it. Swap roles.

Simon Says Give simple instructions such as, 'Simon says move two steps forward', and, 'Now stretch your hands up into the air.' You must only do the action if the sentence begins with 'Simon says'.

Go for a penny walk

Take a penny and step out of your home. Flip the coin. If it lands heads up, you turn right. If it lands tails up, you turn left. Every time you come to a junction, flip the coin to decide which way to go. See where you end up.

Make trails

Children love making and following trails, so have fun:

These activities can also help children to get to know their local area

PHOTOS JANE HEWITT; ADOBE STOCK

- creating a trail on asphalt using a watering can or bottle of water
- using breadcrumbs to create a trail in a park and seeing if the birds follow you and eat up the crumbs
- dragging your heel into sand to make trails for others to follow
- searching for snail trails. This works best early in the morning. See if you can find the snail that made the trail.

Visit a maze or labyrinth

Often these are found in surprising places such as church grounds or botanical gardens.

Rearrange the furniture

This is exciting for children. How will they rearrange their bedroom or the living room? It's also a useful activity as often lost toys turn up under the bed or sofa!

Create obstacle courses

Many children love creating courses that involve racing over, through and around objects. Include blankets or covers to crawl under, cushions to hop around, walking along a skipping rope, and so on.

Share play park photographs

When at a park or play space, your child will use the equipment in lots of different ways. Take photos and talk about where they played, using positional language as you look through them together.

View the world

Seeing the world from a different angle is an important element of developing children's understanding of position. Whether hanging from a bar in a play park or practising how to do a handstand, these activities help children view the world from a new position. It can be as simple as looking through your legs and seeing how this changes what things look like.

Why not try:

Spinning on the spot Have a giggle and talk about turning around in different directions and whether this makes a difference. Remember to do this where there is a soft surface and plenty of space to avoid bumping into other objects.

Rolling down a hill It needn't be a big hill, just a small grassy area with a gentle slope will provide enough fun for many children.

Hanging upside down Most play parks should have climbing frames or bars that children can hang upside down from. ■

Juliet Robertson is the author of Messy Maths: A Playful, Outdoor Approach for Early Years

STORY TIME

Use books, songs and rhymes to talk about position, movement and direction with your child and reinforce prepositions and the language of place. Try, for example:

Where is Spot? by Eric Hill
We're Going on a Bear Hunt by Michael Rosen
Each Peach Pear Plum by Janet and Allan Ahlberg
The Very Busy Spider by Eric Carle
The Green Line by Polly Farquharson
North, South, East, West by Margaret Wise Brown