



HELPING YOUR  
CHILDREN  
LEARN AND ENJOY  
MATHEMATICS

# COUNTING AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Counting seems so simple—we hardly give it any thought. However counting is the foundation for many mathematics concepts and procedures. It is also important because it is one of the first math concepts young children learn. You can help them learn AND enjoy counting!

Even young children have the desire to “count” things in their early exploration of the world. If children develop an early understanding of the many aspects of counting, they will have an advantage when they begin to study mathematics in school. Early counting experiences give parents wonderful opportunities to help children explore and practice this basic skill.

Because young children often want to count, you can often try counting with children as young as one. You will know right away if children are not ready for counting; they simply won’t be interested. If your young child is not interested in counting, don’t worry; wait a month and then try again. The first counting you do with your children should be fun, like playing a game. It’s very important that both of you enjoy early counting experiences.

## COUNTING ONE NUMBER FOR ONE OBJECT

When your children learn to count one number for one object, they have mastered a concept called *one-to-one correspondence*. For counting to be useful, you must count only ONE number for ONE object. It’s important not to skip or add extra numbers while you count so the last number you say is the total number of objects you are counting. This concept seems natural to adults, but many young children struggle with one-to-one correspondence because, in the beginning, counting sounds like a song to them, just like the alphabet song. There is nothing wrong with children saying numbers quickly but, when they are counting, they must slow down and take care to count one number for one object—otherwise the number they end with will not match the number of objects, and this makes counting less than useful.

## COUNTING ALL SORTS OF OBJECTS

Young children need to count lots of different things. The more opportunities and the more varied the objects young children have to count, the better they will understand the meaning and use of numbers—and the more confidence they will have with mathematics later on.

The best objects for young counters tend to be separate objects that they can move around and count easily. As children become good counters, they will learn to count things they cannot touch or move around. For many children, favorite early “counters” are Cheerios, cookies, or fish crackers—math you can eat!

To begin, take five of the same object—fish crackers, for example—and put them in a line with a bit of space between each one. Before you count, help your children form a “counting finger,” a fist with one finger pointing out. Using their counting finger, you can help them touch the first cracker in the row. Together count out-loud “One,” and, with the finger still touching the cracker, move it away from the line of crackers so that it doesn’t get counted a second time—a mistake young counters often make. Now count “Two” while their counting finger moves to touch and move the second cracker. Continue in the same way until you have counted the last cracker, “Five,” and moved it into the pile. Make sure you say “You’ve counted FIVE crackers!” so that your children learn that counting has a purpose—to find out how many. Of course, now comes the fun part—eat the crackers!

### COUNTING MANY MORE THINGS

If your children can correctly count five objects and are interested in counting more, increase the number slowly and, in time, try counting things they can’t touch or move. There is no rule for how high a child should be able to count at any given age. Be careful and don’t push your children too fast. If they aren’t having fun, it may be TOO many. You will know you have it right when counting is enjoyable for both of you.

### MATH TIPS FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG COUNTERS

- Find things to count with your children every day, everywhere, and in every way. Start slowly with just a few things and objects that look a lot alike. As your children’s ability to count grows, increase the size of the collections and find different types of things to count.
- Children discover that counting is more than a sing-song repetition when they count real objects such as crackers, cookies, or stuffed animals. Encourage your children to say just one number when they touch or point to each object. Arrange objects in different ways for counting: in piles, rows, and circles. When your children finish counting, encourage their counting by saying, “One, two, three cookies. You counted three cookies. Great!”
- Sometimes children forget which objects they have counted and which they haven’t counted. If this happens, have your children move each object into a “counted” pile as they count. If your child gets frustrated or continues repeating the same mistake, be patient and do something else for a while. Try again another day!
- Don’t worry if your children use their fingers when they count objects they can’t touch. Fingers are the earliest math tools children have! They are always handy and ready to use. Children will stop using their fingers to count when they learn there are faster and better ways to do math.

## COUNTING LOTS OF THINGS

Anything can be counted! Make a game of finding all sorts of things to count—inside and outside! With the earliest counting, it’s best to find objects that are mostly the same, such as spoons—even if all the spoons aren’t exactly the same. By sometimes counting big things and then sometimes counting little things, children will learn that five spoons is quite different from five elephants, but that both have “fiveness” in common.

Try counting these things:

- Stairs as you go up or down.
- The glasses of orange juice in an orange juice carton (you can always pour it back).
- How many times you can hop on one foot (how many on the other foot?).
- Eggs in the carton.
- Shoes, then pairs of shoes.
- Spoons, knives, and forks—separately or together as “utensils.”
- The petals on different flowers.
- Blue cars on the freeway.
- The pennies you save.

Encourage your children to look all around and come up with many different things to count!

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