
Ready for School Parent News: **Learning to Count**

Teaching children to count may seem like an easy task, but there are actually many components to this seemingly simple task which evolve over time. For example:

- The first step in counting is typically “rote counting”, or memorizing the names and order of the numbers. Often children are able to do this before age three; however, this does not mean that children understand the concepts behind the numbers. Numerical concepts follow later.
- To count higher than nine, children need to understand that a new “decade” begins and what that decade is called. In English, the “teen” numbers are the hardest to learn because they have somewhat random names. It would be easier if after ten, you had “oneteen, twoteen, threeteen” instead of “eleven, twelve, thirteen.” This requires children to memorize the numbers and sequence and this takes time. Another challenge is remembering the name of the new decade. We have all heard a child pause after counting to 29 and then say “50!” Car rides and other waiting times are good times to practice counting, but keep it light and fun and change activities when your child loses interest. You want to keep your child interested and motivated to learn to count, not turned off to numbers.
- One-to-one correspondence is another important concept for children to master. This means that a child links each number to an additional object. Initially children may count and skip items or touch more than one item as they say a number name. For practice in one-to-one correspondence, ask children to set the table and count as they put one napkin at each place, one spoon at each place, etc.
- Keeping track of what was counted is another important component to one-to-one correspondence. For correct counting, children have to have a method for remembering which items they already counted and not counting one item multiple times. A child can use the correct number sequence and use one-to-one correspondence, but still get the incorrect answer, if he counts an item more than once. Introduce methods for keeping track such as counting objects into sections of an egg carton, having your child put only one object in each section as she counts. Or use a piece of paper with a line drawn down the middle. Start with all of the objects to the left of the line. Have your child move objects to the right of the line as they are counted.
- Parents sometimes wonder whether using fingers to count is a good skill to teach. For many children, finger counting may be an excellent way for them to practice one-to-one correspondence (one finger per object).
- Reading counting books together may be another low-key way to reinforce counting concepts. There are lots available – a few suggestions are *Anno’s Counting Book* by Mitsumasa Anno, *Teeth, Tails and Tentacles: An Animal Counting Book* by Christopher Wormell, *Duckie’s Ducklings: A one-to-one counting book* by Frances Barry and *Corduroy’s Day: A Counting Book* by Don Freeman.

Resource: Copley, J. V. (2000). *The Young Child and Mathematics*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.