

Maths mastery in the Early Years is about developing deep, secure, and flexible understanding of mathematical concepts rather than rushing children through content. It focuses on building strong foundations that will support future learning.

In practice, maths mastery looks like children having a rich understanding of number. They are confident in counting, recognising quantities, and understanding that numbers represent amounts. For example, a child demonstrating mastery doesn't just recite numbers to 10 but understands what "five" really means, can show it using objects, fingers, or drawings, and can recognise it in different contexts.

A key feature is the emphasis on depth over speed. Children spend longer exploring small numbers, typically within 10, to fully grasp concepts such as composition (how numbers are made up) and relationships between numbers. For instance, they learn that 5 can be made from 2 and 3, or 4 and 1, and begin to see patterns in these combinations.

Mathematical talk is central to mastery. Children are encouraged to explain their thinking, describe what they notice, and use appropriate vocabulary such as "more," "fewer," "equal," "altogether," and "part." Practitioners model this language and create opportunities for discussion through play and guided activities.

Maths mastery in early years is also highly practical and play based. It is embedded in everyday activities—sharing snacks, building with blocks, sorting objects, or comparing sizes. These experiences help children see maths as meaningful and relevant.

Carefully designed adult interactions play a crucial role. Practitioners observe children closely, identify their current understanding, and provide just enough challenge to extend their thinking. This might involve asking probing questions, introducing new vocabulary, or presenting a slightly more complex problem.

Finally, a mastery approach values all learners. It assumes that with the right support, all children can achieve a strong understanding of early mathematical concepts. Rather than moving some children ahead too quickly, the focus is on ensuring everyone develops confidence, curiosity, and a positive attitude towards maths.

In summary, maths mastery in the Early Years is characterised by deep understanding, rich language, hands-on exploration, and a focus on meaningful, connected learning experiences.

Children's early experiences of Maths can also be seen through applying a knowledge of Schemas. Schemas are patterns of repeated behaviour that children use to explore and make sense of the world around them. In early childhood learning, they are often seen as clusters of actions or ideas that a child returns to again and again. Rather than being random habits, schemas reflect how children are actively building understanding through experience.

For those practitioners interested in gaining more knowledge about Schemas we have a spotlight session on Tuesday 21st April 4.00- 5.00. Booking via EarlyYearsBusinessSupport@sheffield.gov.uk