

Understanding the 11+: A Guide for Parents

What is the 11+?

The 11+ is an entrance assessment used by grammar schools to identify children who are likely to thrive in a more academically focused environment.

In Gloucestershire, children usually take the test at the start of Year 6 (September). Registration typically opens in the spring/summer of Year 5, with the test taken in September of Year 6 and school applications submitted shortly afterwards.

It is important to understand that:

- The 11+ is not a measure of overall ability or potential
- It is a snapshot of how a child performs on a specific type of test, on a specific day
- Grammar schools can be an excellent fit for some children, but not for all

What does the 11+ test assess?

The test is less about what children have been taught in school, and more about how they think, apply knowledge, and work under time pressure.

While formats vary slightly between schools, the test typically assesses four main areas:

1. English

- Reading comprehension
- Vocabulary
- Inference (reading between the lines)

2. Mathematics

- Number fluency
- Problem solving
- Applying knowledge in unfamiliar contexts

3. Verbal Reasoning (VR)

- Patterns in language
- Codes, sequences, and logic using words
- Strongly linked to vocabulary

4. Non-Verbal Reasoning (NVR)

- Visual patterns and sequences

- Spatial reasoning
- Problem solving using shapes and diagrams

How should families approach preparation?

Preparation does not need to be intense or overwhelming to be effective. In fact, the most effective approach is usually steady, calm, and consistent over time.

Below are ten practical ways to support your child.

10 Ways to Support Your Child Through the 11+

1. Keep perspective

The 11+ is just one pathway. Your child's wellbeing, confidence, and long-term love of learning matter far more than the outcome of a single test.

2. Build strong reading habits

Regular reading is one of the most powerful ways to prepare:

- Aim for daily reading
- Discuss what they've read
- Explore a wide range of vocabulary-rich texts

3. Focus on vocabulary development

Vocabulary underpins a large part of the test, especially verbal reasoning and comprehension.

- Talk about new words
- Encourage curiosity about language
- Revisit and use new vocabulary in context

4. Strengthen core maths skills

Confidence with number is key:

- Times tables
- Mental arithmetic (Schofield and Sims mental arithmetic books (usually books 4-5 for 11+ prep) are one good and accessible resource for this
- Applying maths to problem-solving situations

5. Introduce reasoning gradually

Verbal and non-verbal reasoning are unfamiliar to most children.

- Start slowly
- Focus on understanding patterns, not just getting answers
- Build familiarity over time

Many children find the style of questions unfamiliar at first. Gentle exposure to the types of questions used in the 11+ can help build confidence and reduce anxiety.

6. Keep sessions short and consistent

Short, regular practice (e.g. 10–20 minutes) is far more effective than long, infrequent sessions.

7. Prioritise understanding over speed (at first)

Accuracy and understanding come before speed. Timing can be introduced gradually later in the process.

8. Create a calm, low-pressure environment

Children tend to perform best when they feel supported rather than pressured.

- Avoid making the 11+ feel too high-stakes
- Keep conversations balanced and reassuring

9. Help your child become more independent

The 11+ requires children to:

- Work through questions on their own
- Manage time
- Stay focused

Encourage independence in small, everyday ways.

10. Know your child

Grammar school is not the right environment for every child.

Consider:

- Do they enjoy academic challenge?
- Are they relatively independent?
- Do they cope well with pressure?

The goal is not just to “pass”, but to find the right fit.

Final thoughts

For many families, the 11+ can feel confusing or overwhelming at first. With the right approach, it can become much more manageable.

A calm, informed, and steady approach — focused on building strong foundations over time — is usually the most effective way forward.

If you have any questions or would like further guidance, you are always welcome to get in touch.